

COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

Anything that prevents the smooth dissemination (sending) or comprehension (receiving) of a message, either at the sender's end or receiver's end, is a barrier to communication. Such barriers cause communication failures. Communication failures may have serious effects as they affect our personal and professional relationships to the extent of causing ruptures. On the personal level, such failures may cause low self-esteem. As one's confidence level falls, one's productivity also decreases. On the other hand, on the professional level, communication lapses may not only halt an individual's career growth but also cause damage to the organizations.

In organizations, the failure to communicate effectively may cause disruptions or delays in achieving targets. From the point of view of finance, a communication failure may result in higher project costs and, hence, affect profitability. For example, a failure to explain terms clearly to the clients may lead to the cancellation of an order. There may be a loss of goodwill if an aggrieved customer is not handled tactfully.

Communication barriers are the elements that come in the way of the free flow of the communication process. They may pop up at any stage of the communication process and have the potential to create misunderstanding and ambiguity. For instance, the sender of a message who is not conversant with the language known to his receiver may use erroneous or fragmented language, thus causing a communication barrier. Likewise, a receiver who is distantly located from where the sender is disseminating some important information may either receive the message late (if sent using traditional modes such as the ordinary post) or only partially understand the essence of it. Sometimes, the environment in which communication takes place may also result in barriers—a noisy or filthy ambience; tense receivers; an ineffective means of communication or an incorrect choice of the mode of communication.

There may be various factors—intentional or unintentional—that may cause communication barriers.

1. **Lack of planning:** Every message is conveyed with a specific purpose in mind. In oral communication, words are comparable to arrows—once released, they do not return. One needs to know one's own abilities to express the message well. Simultaneously, the limitations of the medium should also be considered. If a message

is communicated without adequate planning, then the desired result may not be obtained. For example, an invitation to potential investors to invest money in a mutual fund might not offer all the relevant details such as entry and exit points, the risks involved, etc. This would lead to a loss of interest in the scheme. Therefore, one would need to plan in advance before drafting such messages.

2. **Lack of trust:** The relationship between the sender and the receiver plays an important role in a communication situation. Any sort of lack of trust or understanding between them may cause a communication barrier. For example, a compliment paid by a hostile boss is likely to be received by a subordinate with caution. The subordinate might speculate about the reasons behind such a compliment and attribute an incorrect cause to it, even if the compliment was paid merely as a compliment and not as part of some hidden/negative purpose. Pune based Forbes Marshall, a company dealing in steam engineering and control instrumentation has a unique system in place to counter lack of trust even before it arises. The company has a value digression committee, which allows members to send any digression in the values of the company to a confidential email address available in the general mailing list. Once the information reaches the council, they address the concerns with strict confidence and the course corrections are intimated to the concerned member.²
3. **Ambiguity:** It refers to the difficulty of understanding or explaining something because it involves making different inferences. Therefore, it is quite possible that the receiver does not correctly understand the meaning intended by the sender. An incorrect inference is often drawn because the message yields more than one meaning. For example, an instruction that reads 'relevant details must be submitted for preparation of order by Friday' is ambiguous. It does not clarify whether the details are required by Friday or that the order must be prepared by that day. During T-Mobile's (Bonn, Germany-based holding company of Deutsche Telekom AG) orientation and training for customer service representatives, the call centre general manager hands out his personal telephone number for new hires who may have any ambiguous questions or concerns. This allows employees to submit questions to the senior leaders through what is called the 'HotSeat' e-mail box to which the CEO himself replies directly via video message.³
4. **Distortions:** It refers to twists or changes in facts or ideas in a message such that they are no longer correct or true. Much of communication does not succeed because the receiver distorts the sender's original ideas to suit the receiver's convenience. While the sender believes that the message has been delivered correctly and the desired action will follow, the truth is that the receiver has not taken it in its original form. For instance, 'The productivity-linked bonus will be paid on the seventh of the next month subject to the realization of outstanding payments', has a conditional clause. However, it is quite possible that the factory workers (the receivers of this message) conveniently forget this conditional clause and claim their money.
5. **Implied meanings:** Messages may not always convey a meaning in a straightforward manner. If the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of the sender and the receiver are not similar, then it is possible that the latter does not uncover the implied meaning. For example, a reference to the weather in the middle of a conversation on another topic is often indicative of the sender's desire to change the topic of discussion. The Scooter Store, one of US's largest suppliers of power wheelchairs and scooters, makes use of implied meanings of messages in a very innovative way. It has a programme called *Freedom Expressions* in which new employees are given blank papers and colours and asked to draw what freedom and independence would 'look' like if they were trying to explain them to someone who did not speak English or understand their culture. The drawings are then turned into a presentation which reminds employees of how Scooter

Store's customers are missing out on events such as these due to the loss of mobility. This exercise not only emphasizes the company's mission statement, but also makes the core ideology of focus on the customer, come to life for the new employees.⁴

6. **Drawing inference:** What we directly see, hear, feel, taste, smell or can immediately verify and confirm constitutes a *fact*. However, statements that go beyond facts (and conclusions based on facts) are called *inferences*. Marketing professionals, advertisers, architects, engineers, and designers all draw inferences. Being experts in their own fields, their inferences are often sound enough to be relied on. In contrast, when non-experts draw inferences without trying to verify facts, they tend to make errors causing further communication problems. In a hypothetical situation, a manager observes that a particular worker has been leaving the office one hour late every day for the last two weeks. What can be inferred from this observation? Is the worker extremely conscientious and does not mind even staying overtime? Is the worker inefficient and unable to finish the work in time and therefore has to stay back after office hours? Is the worker burdened with immense work pressure and deserves relief? Is the worker in search of company secrets which can be found out after everyone else has left the office? Is the overstaying aimed at impressing the superiors? Obviously, not all of these inferences can be correct. An incorrect inference will be a barrier to perfect communication.
7. **Noise:** It is used to describe any information that is not wanted and that can make it difficult for important or useful information to be understood clearly. Noise is a major barrier to communication. The word 'noise' also refers to all kinds of physical interference, like illegible handwriting, blemished copies of typescripts, poor telephone connections, slow Internet connections and so on. The sender and the receiver must both ensure that the place chosen for communication is congenial for the proper dissemination of messages. For instance, in factories, oral communication is rendered difficult as the loud noise of machines, blaring sirens etc. may interfere with face-to-face conversation or communication over the telephone or the public address system.
8. **Time and distance:** Time and distance also act as barriers to the smooth flow of communication. The use of telephones, along with computer technology, has made communication very fast and has, to a large extent, overcome the space barrier. However, technical glitches sometimes may make these facilities ineffective. In such cases, the physical distance between the sender and the receiver becomes a strong barrier. Even where the physical distance does not matter much, such as a closed room, a faulty seating arrangement can also become a barrier to effective communication.
9. **Wrong choice of medium:** From the array of media available at our disposal—oral, written visual, audio-visual, computer-mediated communication etc.—it is important to choose the medium judiciously to suit the message's context, the time of delivery and the receiver's level of understanding. A poor choice of the medium of communication may also act as a barrier in the successful transmission of a message. Let us consider the following situations:
 - (a) A salesman has to submit a report on the comparative sales figures of the last four months. If he writes a lengthy paragraph incorporating the information or mentions the details over the phone, he may not be able to incorporate everything. Ideally, he should present the figures in tabular form, make a bar chart or use Microsoft Excel to create a spreadsheet.
 - (b) An employee wants to express his regret to his supervisor for coming late to work on a regular basis. In this case, a written explanation alone may prove to be ineffective. Face-to-face communication will probably be the best medium. It would allow him to make his regret felt to his supervisor not only through verbal language but also through non-verbal indicators such as body language and facial expression.



TECH WORLD

Overcoming Language Barriers

As the world wide web (www) emerges as an agent of societal transformation in India, the time has come when the web needs to shift from connecting the corporate to connecting the individual in the rural societies.

India is a diverse country and has 22 official languages. More than a billion people all over the world speak one or another of the Indian languages like Hindi, Bengali, Telugu, Marathi, Tamil, or Urdu. In this regard, machine translation (MT) systems, also called 'content multiplier tools', have come up as a classic example of Computational Paninian Grammar (CPG) based technological advancement, which particularly works well for Indian languages.⁵

Currently, content multiplier tools are available in three modules—Sampark (Indian to Indian), AnglaMT (English to Bengali, Malayalam, Punjabi and Urdu) and Anvadaksh (English to Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Oriya, Urdu and Tamil).⁶ On the other hand, we have *Samosapedia* (<http://samosapedia.com/>), a crowd-sourced South Asian language and culture Web site which provides a guide to the English words and phrases of South-East Asia. The Web site modestly describes itself as 'the definitive guide to South Asian lingo' and invites users to 'catalogue and celebrate the rich, diverse and ever-evolving landscape of this region's shared vernacular'. Over 2,500 words and phrases have been added since *Samosapedia* was launched at the end of June 2011. Many phrases it lists are common across India: A 'chaddi buddy' (lit: underwear friend) is someone you've known since childhood; 'kabab mein haddi' (lit: a bone in the kebab) is a 'third wheel' with better imagery; an 'enthu cutlet' (lit: an enthusiastic mincemeat croquette) is an overly earnest soul. But then there are those that come from regions, subcultures and even neighbourhoods. 'Talking-shalking' highlights the Punjabi fondness for rhyme. 'Sandra from Bandra' is a stereotype from a predominantly Catholic suburb of Mumbai. 'Send it' refers to smoking pot. The entries at *Samosapedia* also offer an insight into how Indian culture is changing.⁷

Thus, with the development of such language technologies and Web sites, it is now possible to overcome the language barrier of communication.

FACTORS CAUSING COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

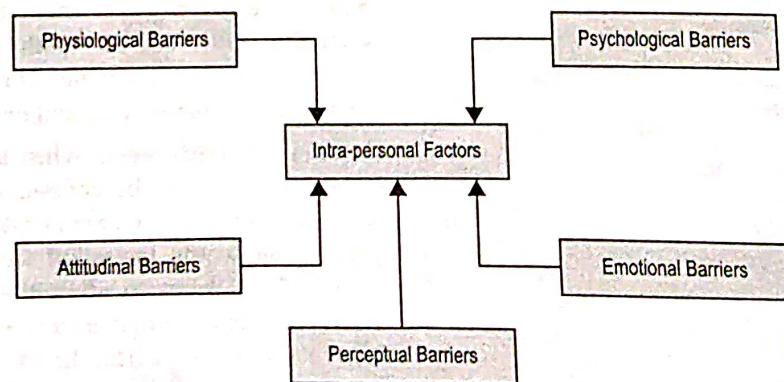
For the systematic study of causes of communication barriers, they may be broadly classified as intra-personal, inter-personal, and environmental communication barriers.

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Intra-personal Communication Barriers

These factors are the ones present within an individual's own self and pose a hurdle from within the individual's communication—both in sending and receiving messages. These communication barriers are within the individual's control—individuals may deal with them on their own and overcome them. These barriers may be caused due to broader factors such as specific socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. For instance, an individual who has been born and brought up in a closed culture will be less expressive and hesitant in conveying feelings—both happy and sad—than another individual who comes from an open culture. Likewise, an individual who has received prejudiced treatment from other people—in the family, at the workplace or society at large—is likely to develop either selective perception or a judgmental attitude.

Intra-personal communication barriers can be of four broad categories—psychological barriers, perceptual barriers, attitudinal barriers, and emotional barriers.



For better understanding, intra-personal communication barriers can be grouped under five broad categories—physiological barriers, psychological barriers, perceptual barriers, attitudinal barriers, and emotional barriers (see Fig. 2.1).

Fig. 2.1 Five Types of Intra-personal Communication Barriers

Physiological Barriers

These are caused by the individual's own personal discomfort such as sensory dysfunctions. This may occur on the part of the receiver or the sender. These are the barriers that result from performance characteristics and limitations such as memory, concentration, mental sharpness and the functioning of the sensory organs like eyes, ears, nose, etc. For a person who is not able to speak, hear or see, certain alternative communication options and methods should be ensured to make communication possible. For instance, in a classroom, the same message (say, a PowerPoint presentation) delivered by the same professor may be differently received by a student with poor eyesight and another with good eyesight. However, this barrier can be overcome by providing suitable visual aids—spectacles or contact lenses for example—to that student, or allowing them to sit closer to the speaker. Physiological barriers can be caused by any of the following problems—vision impairment, hearing impairment; speech disorders such as stammering, apraxia and dysarthria; dyslexia (a range of learning difficulties related to the written word); or aphasia (a disorder that results from damage to portions of the brain that are responsible for language).

Psychological Barriers

With the advancement in technology, physical barriers to communication are rapidly disappearing, but psychological barriers are increasing. These psychological barriers are caused due to the emotional character and mental limitations of human beings. These barriers result in absent-mindedness, the fear of expressing one's ideas to others, excitement and emotional instability, accounting for an overwhelming number of communication problems. Some of the common types of psychological communication barriers are:

1. **False assumptions:** Very frequently, communication fails because the sender of the message fails to communicate instructions well because he or she assumes that the receiver(s) understood what they have said, but the fact could be that the receiver did not understand anything that was communicated to them or partially understood; both situations are undesirable in a smooth communication process. Here, a communicator tends to explain things in a way that they would find comprehensible. However, the sender's ability to understand is shaped by their personal experience and no two people are alike in this regard. An assumption of the sender that 'the receiver knows how to do something or follow instructions' is often wrong or unjustified. Likewise, the receiver may also wish to be understood in a certain way and encourage false assumptions by the sender. For example, in order to prevent false assumptions, a quality control manager should first check whether the workers are familiar with Six Sigma standards before pulling them up for its non-adherence.
2. **Overconfidence and apathy:** When a person—a sender or a receiver—thinks that he/she knows all about a subject, he/she runs the risk of overconfidence. This mindset causes a person to be unwilling to learn new ideas. It is the best to approach communication with humility and a willingness to learn, for it is almost impossible to know everything about any particular area. At the other extreme is an apathetic sender or receiver who creates a barrier due to a lack of emotion or interest in what is being sent or received. Apathy causes communication to break down because it interrupts effective listening. This is for the reason that an apathetic speaker does not relate information well and may leave out key points.
3. **Fear and defensiveness:** When a sender is fearful or defensive about the subject matter that needs to be communicated to the receiver(s), the sender may go too far in the attempt to communicate and alienate the receiver(s) with melodramatic gestures and words. Instead of accepting the mistake, the sender might try to justify the mistake or refuse to admit it altogether, creating further misunderstanding. Such defensive behaviour may also ruin the sender's credibility with receivers. Likewise, when a receiver is fearful, he or she won't understand what is being said, leading them to stop listening, which would lead to more mistakes in future.

Perceptual Barriers

The perceptual process determines what messages we select or screen out, as well as how the selected information is organized and interpreted. If the senders' and receivers' perceptions are not aligned, it can be a significant source of barrier in the communication process. In fact, perceptual barriers are the *mental blocks* that result from the individual's own perception. We all see the world differently based on preconceived ideas and notions. The way one perceives a subject or an event affects the way in which his/her thoughts about it are converted while communicating—sending, receiving, interpreting or analysing a message. We have this tendency to see, hear or interpret any message the way we want them to be—seeking out favourable interpretations and ignoring unfavourable ones. For example, take a hypothetical situation where all your innovation and 'out-of-the-box thinking' at the workplace is met with indifference by your colleagues. It is quite likely that over a period of time you withdraw yourself and do not communicate your ideas freely with others.

Attitudinal Barriers

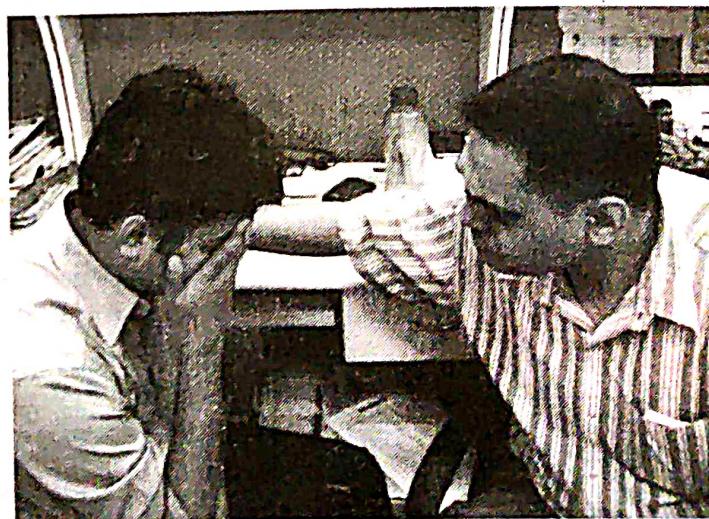
These are the barriers that result from the individual's own attitude and assumptions that built up over a period of time based on their socio-economic and cultural background and gets reflected in their day-to-day communication with others. These barriers may be caused by factors such as poor management, personality conflicts, personal attitudes of individuals (which may be due to dissatisfaction or lack of motivation at work brought about by insufficient training) or just resistance to change. Receivers' personal attitudes and opinions often act as barriers to effective communication. If the message transmitted by the sender coincides with his opinions and attitudes, he tends to receive it openly and favourably. However, if the message does not coincide with his views or tends to run contrary to his accepted beliefs, he does not respond favourably. For instance, if a change in the policy of an organization proves advantageous to employees, he welcomes it as progressive and beneficial move but if it affects him adversely, he rejects it as a counter-productive step and regards it to be part of the autocracy of the management. Two principal causes of attitudinal barriers are:

- 1. Egocentrism:** It is an attitudinal barrier wherein one tends to feel that one's own ideas are more important or valuable than those of the others. This attitude causes harm as it alienates an egocentric person from others. For example, an egocentric manager may miss out on the creativity and variety of ideas that their subordinate could contribute to a project, and (in an extreme situation) may also lose qualified and experienced employees to a rival company!
- 2. Judgmental attitude:** Many communication failures are caused because the message tends to pass some sort of judgment against the receiver. Therefore, it is not received at its face value. Giving precedence to the expression of opinion over facts and the use of offensive or annoying expressions ensure that the receiver becomes guarded and defensive.

Emotional Barriers

An emotional state of mind plays an important role in the act of communication. People do not see things as they otherwise would, when under stress. What they see and believe at any given moment is influenced by their psychological frames of reference—their beliefs, values, knowledge, experience, and goals. For example, if the sender of the message is perplexed, worried, excited, afraid, nervous or in a disturbed state of mind, the sender's thinking will be blurred and the message will not be organized properly. This state of the sender's mind is sure to be reflected in their message. Similarly, the

A person with low emotional intelligence is much more likely to be emotionally unstable while a person with high emotional intelligence is more likely to provide comfort and be more emotionally stable.



Inter-personal communication barriers belong to two broad categories—**sender-centre barriers** and **receiver-centre barriers**.

Fig. 2.2 Two Types of Inter-personal Communication Barriers

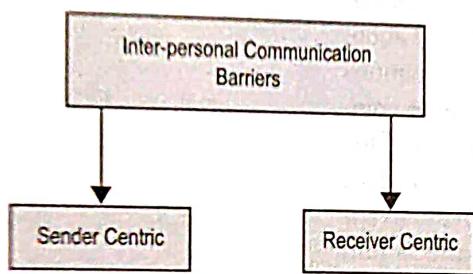
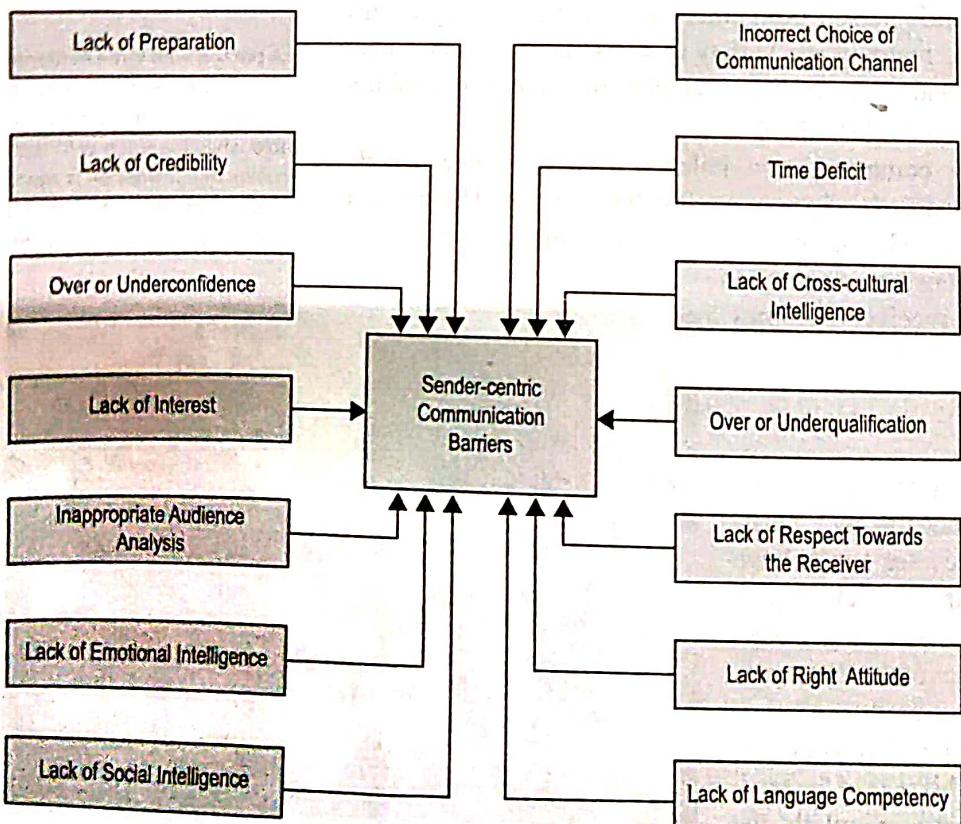


Fig. 2.3 Sender-centric Communication Barriers



Emotions of the receiver also affect the communication process. If the receiver is upset about something, that state of mind will come in the way of their perception of the message. Studies show that an individual with high emotional intelligence (EI) is likely to be more emotionally stable and is less affected by these emotional barriers than an individual who scores low on emotional intelligence or is emotionally unstable. For instance, in a workplace, the same warning (say, for a missed deadline) given by the same supervisor may be differently received and reciprocated by an emotionally stable employee and an emotionally unstable employee. Where the former may take the warning at face value and try to meet it, the latter may either ignore it or react disagreeably to it.

Inter-personal Communication Barriers

These factors are the ones present outside an individual's own self—in the external environment between the sender and the receiver of the message, and are relatively outside the individual's control. They may either be related with the other person or persons one is communicating with (*receiver-centric*) or they may be due to the individual's own shortcomings (*sender-centric*), or both. These inter-personal communication barriers may be caused due to various known or unknown external elements such as the lack of trust towards the sender of the message or the lack of credibility of the message itself; aggressive or disruptive message delivery by the sender; incompatible language competency between the sender and the receiver of the message or excessive use of technical terms (jargon) or incorrect selection of the medium for the dissemination of the message. For instance, if the sender of the message is a qualified chartered accountant who communicates with a client (a simple primary school teacher) about the intricacies of filing income-tax returns in accountancy-specific jargon, the accountant is likely to confuse rather than help the receiver, diluting the effect of the communication.

For better understanding, inter-personal communication barriers can be classified into two broad categories—**sender-centric barriers** and **receiver-centric barriers** (see Fig. 2.2).

Sender-centric Communication Barriers

These are the barriers that result from lapses at the sender's end. These may occur at any of the 'pre-message delivery' stages—ideation, preparation, or presentation of the message in the communication process. The reasons behind such barriers may be many. For better understanding, see Fig. 2.3.

Lack of interest When the sender himself is not interested in the topic/subject of the message, communication is bound to be ineffective. For example, if a chartered accountant who specializes in finance makes a presentation on marketing, the presentation is not likely to do justice to the topic.

Overconfidence or underconfidence Communication often fails due to the sender's overconfidence or underconfidence about the topic. Both situations are dangerous, as an overconfident person may take the message too casually while an underconfident person might be overawed and not act properly.

Lack of preparation Very often, the lack of preparation results either from the paucity of relevant information about a topic or an incorrect audience analysis. However, using the secondary data available on the Internet and other resources are easy in this technologically advanced era. Insufficient audience analysis, however, may certainly lead to a communication failure. For example, a speaker who has prepared to speak before 30 middle-management level employees may not be comfortable sharing the same information with 50 frontline executives. We will discuss audience analysis in detail later in this chapter.

Overqualification or underqualification It is important that the sender of the message is aptly qualified in the related field because neither an overqualified nor an underqualified person can successfully strike a chord with the audience. An overqualified person may tend to get carried away in the nitty-gritty of the subject matter, while an underqualified person may try to get away with superficial information. For example, a professor with a Ph.D. who teaches post-graduate level students may not be equally comfortable teaching the same topic to school-level students.

Time deficit In present-day life, time is always at a premium and if the sender of the message compromises by not giving the required time for preparation or dissemination of the message, the receiver(s) will face problems. For example, a manager presiding over a staff meeting in a conference room hastily scribbles the message, 'Ask Mr Vineet to wait in my office' (in illegible handwriting) on a piece of paper and passes it on to his secretary, which is misread as, 'Ask Mr Vineet to wake in my office', no sense can be made of it.

Lack of language competency or linguistic deficiency Language plays an important role in any inter-personal communication where both the sender and the receiver must be reasonably comfortable with the language used. This is because in any communication process—oral or written, the sender(s) *encode(s)* ideas, which the receiver(s) *decode(s)* to understand and give feedback accordingly. Any lapse on either side may lead to a communication failure. There are some points that the sender needs to keep in mind as:

1. **Grammar:** The message, irrespective of the language, should be delivered using correct grammar with reference to syntax, gender, time, and tense. For instance, a sender referring to a male client as 'she' and vice versa might offend the client.
2. **Etymology:** It is important to choose the *right* and easily *comprehensible* word and not choose the *difficult* and *too technical* words as it is likely that the sender may attach different meanings to words because words have both *denotative* and *connotative* meaning. Assessing a receiver's vocabulary level can help a sender to choose the words that are in sync with the receivers' comprehension ability. If words are too difficult or too technical, the receiver may not understand them; at the same time if the words are too simple, the receiver might get bored.
3. **Syntactical:** As we communicate our ideas not in words but in sentences, the message needs to be structured using the correct syntax. For instance, a sender referring to consumer durables says, 'we produce high quality home appliances *who* can make your day-to-day chores *enjoyable*'. This might amuse their audience who might wonder 'whether home appliances are living or non-living' and 'whether chores can be enjoyable'.
4. **Non-verbal:** Apart from the grammatical and syntactical aspects of verbal communication, the sender should also make sure that non-verbal communication, including the body language, is concordant with the verbal message. For instance, a subordinate trying to calm down his angry boss says, 'I have deep regard for you, sir. I genuinely apologize for the late submission of my sales report', with chewing gum in his mouth and both his hands in the pockets of his trousers. Here, the boss (the receiver of this message) is more likely to believe that the subordinate is deceptive and casual—based on the non-serious non-verbal cues than the sincere verbal message.
5. **Delivery mode:** After ideation and preparation of the message, the delivery mode of the sender's message is also important. Message dissemination that is too fast or too slow (in case of oral delivery) or illegible (in case of written messages) does not produce the desired results.

Inappropriate audience analysis Analysing one's audience is of paramount importance in any form of communication. This is the first and fundamental step for planning communication. Often it has been seen that senders do not seriously reflect upon the significance of their audience. This tendency to ignore audience may be fatal even in the best of the communications. The case discussed in Case Study 1 of this chapter is a classic example of this lapse. In fact, it is very important to understand an audience's background, their preferences and their expectations from the communication. This greatly influences the outcome of any communication. The sender should never take an audience for granted or underestimate their capabilities because the audience is often referred to as the *end user*, and all communication needs to be targeted towards this defined audience. When defining an audience, the factors that must be considered are age, gender, educational qualifications, level of maturity, job functions, skills, language preferences, socio-economic backgrounds, culture, needs and interests, the venue of communication, the channel of communication, etc. Only after considering all these factors can a profile of the intended audience be created, allowing the sender to communicate in a manner that is understood by the audience.

Lack of emotional intelligence (EI) Our emotions are the primary source of our energy, aspirations and impelling force. Emotional intelligence helps in understanding and exploring our own as well as others' emotions in response to different situations, pleasant or unpleasant. It enables us to weigh situations, understand others' feelings resulting from those situations, manage our own emotions in tandem with the situation and get along with each other in a conducive and productive manner. The lack of EI may make us insensitive or hypersensitive to others' emotions and states of mind. For example, a manager trying to console his subordinate on death of his only son in a car accident says, 'Don't worry, every loss opens doors for new opportunities', shows insensitivity towards other's feelings and emotions.

Lack of social intelligence (SI) Social intelligence or SI is the human capacity to understand what is happening in the outer world; how it affects one's inner self; and how one should respond to it in a socially acceptable manner. It is our ability to get along well with others and to get them to *co-operate*, or, at least, not *compete* with us. It includes our awareness of situations and the social dynamics that govern them, our insight into our own perceptions and reaction patterns aided by our precise knowledge of communication styles and strategies which help us achieve our objectives. In short, it encompasses the whole range of our relationships with other humans and with the world in general. The lack of it would mean living in an alienated world where no one bothers about anyone. For example, in a closed Indian culture, the friendly gesture of a manager from the metropolitan city situated corporate office of an organization, extending hand for handshake with a lady subordinate working in the organization's rural centre, may not be interpreted as his 'friendliness' as the rural culture is 'touch averse'.

Lack of cross-cultural intelligence (CCI) Every single culture differs widely from other cultures in a number of ways, such as in the tempo of cultural change, the dimension of their influence, the degree of their complexity, and the extent of their tolerance towards outsiders. Various groups that exist within a major culture are referred to as subcultures. India is home to a wide variety of ethnic and religious sub-cultures, hence people from various economic and social strata, as well as different states might be considered as sub-cultures in India. CCI is all about understanding one's own as well as others' cultures. This intelligence is based on the clear understanding of, firstly our own self, our culture, then of people around us, and their culture. It helps us in recognizing others' cultural diversity; respecting those diversities in their context and congenially reconciling with their diversities to ensure the best outcome from any cross-cultural transactions. However, the lack of CCI may be due to ethno-centricism, a human tendency to judge all other groups according to one's own group's standards, behaviour, and customs. Our ethnocentrism measures the extent to which we are judgmental of other cultures and are unwilling or unable to implement culturally relevant solutions. Our ethnocentrism can also be a critical barrier to our cross-cultural communication. Most often than not, ethnocentric people use culture-based stereotypes, do not adapt their working style and are not open to

incorporating information and customs from other cultures. This is hazardous not only to the individual's success at the workplace but also to organizational growth.

Lack of credibility or reputation Credibility is the level of trust, reliability, and sincerity that an individual brings to a situation. Credibility, both of the content and the person (sender as well as receiver) is a prerequisite to any successful communication. It is credibility that makes the message or the person worthy of consideration. Likewise, the sender's reputation, if high, makes the message more reliable, but if it is low, it makes his message dubious in the eyes of the receiver(s). If the credibility of the sender or the message is questioned, the quality of the receiver's understanding, acceptance and response tends to get reduced. For example, a physiotherapist's advice on physical fitness is likely to be taken more seriously than the one given by a lawyer.

Lack of respect towards the receiver(s) of the message Like credibility, mutual respect between the sender and the receiver is important for successful communication. This mutual respect allows each party to invest time in speaking/listening to the other party.

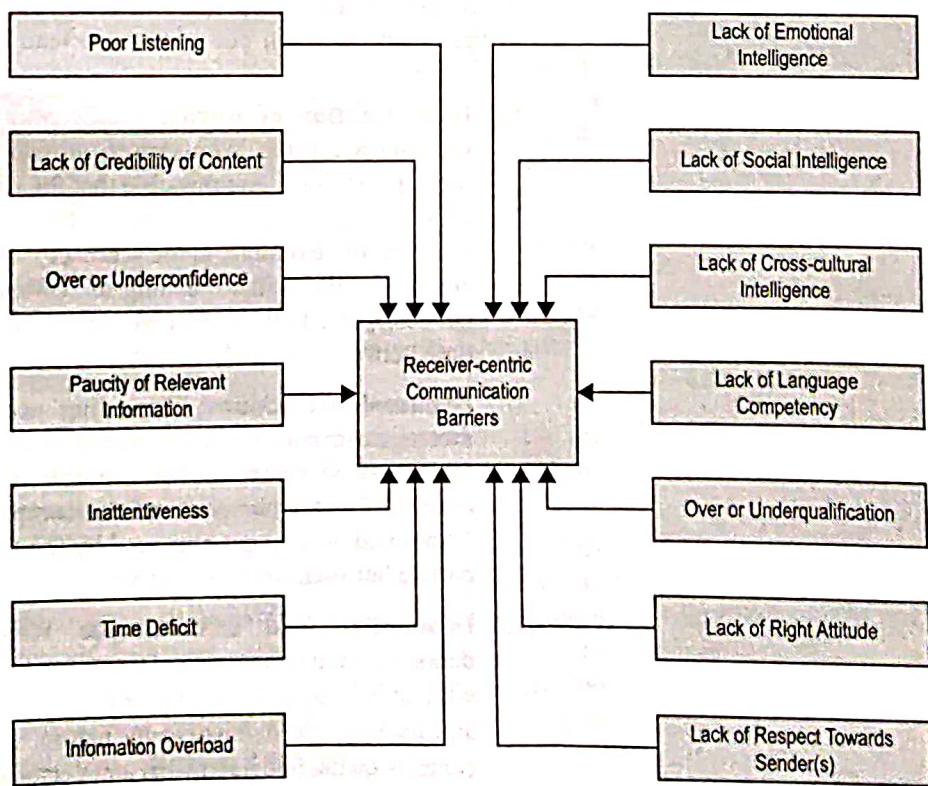
Lack of the right attitude/collaborative effort For successful communication, it is important that the sender does away with his 'I-attitude', a lop-sided self-centric approach devoid of empathy and respect to others and switch to 'You-attitude', a balanced, empathetic and respectful receiver-centric approach. A 'You-attitude' calls for analysing the receiver's socio-economic background, educational level and experience and preparing the message accordingly; considering the receiver's concerns, needs, and motivations; being mindful of the receiver's position, authority status, power, personality, expectations, and culture; emphasizing benefits that they would derive from the message; analysing their values, biases, viewpoints and adapting the message according to their attitudes; and lastly, analysing the receiver's potential emotional reaction to the message and accordingly determining the line of approach.

Incorrect selection of the channel of communication It is important to select the correct channel to suit the message type. A message possessing valid content but delivered through the wrong channel may not get the results it would have otherwise got. Even with a reliable sender, a comprehensible and credible message would fall flat if the wrong channel is selected. For instance, an oral face-to-face communication is preferable to a written one—a text message, e-mail or snail mail—if the sender wants to congratulate a colleague on their recent promotion. This way the sender would not only be expressing greater depth of feeling through the verbal message, but would also be able to complement it with the affectionate non-verbal cues.

Receiver-centric Communication Barriers

These are the barriers that result from the lapses at the receiver's end. These may occur at any of the 'post-message delivery' stages—decoding, comprehending, interpreting or analysing the message in the communication process. For a better understanding, see Fig. 2.4.

Fig. 2.4 Receiver-centric Communication Barriers



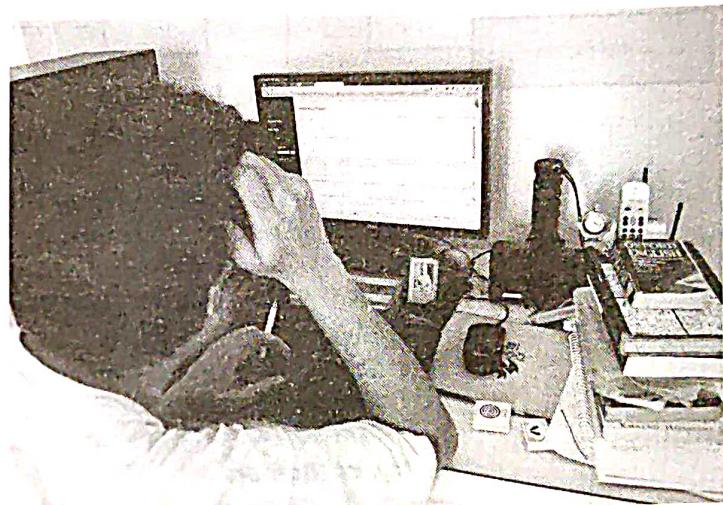
1. **Non-listening or poor listening:** It may result from lack of interest about the topic/subject of the message. A receiver may feel averse to listening to a message if he/she is not interested in that topic/subject, thus leading to communication failure.
2. **Paucity of relevant information:** If the receiver does not have access to the recent developments and is not abreast with their domain's nitty-gritty or lacks conceptual clarity about the topic, indifference may be developed for the subject matter. The receiver would thus not like to waste his time in listening to or reading the message.
3. **Inattentiveness:** Receivers may become inattentive while receiving a message that contains a new idea—often something about which the receiver has no idea. This is due to the natural human apprehension towards anything new. The adult human mind usually resists change. It also threatens security and stability. Thus, the moment a new idea is presented to them, they unconsciously become inattentive. At other times the receiver becomes inattentive because of some external or internal distractions. For example, it is quite possible that an employee does not listen to the supervisor's instructions attentively because of the honking of a vehicle outside (external distraction), or because of amusement at the supervisor's artificial anger (internal distraction). Sometimes, when the receiver has received the message partially, their mind may get busy in framing a reply to it or in guessing what might be said next thus missing out what is actually being said.
4. **Time deficit:** Time is precious not only for the sender of the message but also for the receiver. Any message received in hurry with less focus or a disturbed state of mind is unlikely to get the desired result. It is important that both the sender and the receiver devote sufficient time exchanging information and feedback respectively.
5. **Lack of language competency:** As language is a symbolic means of communication, it poses a lot of possibilities of distortion or misunderstanding of original message. The lack of language competency or linguistic deficiency leads to poorly explained or misunderstood messages resulting in confusion. This is because the words that a sender chooses is received and deciphered through the receiver's *mental filters* based on his/her experience and abilities. We can all think of situations where we have listened to something which we just could not grasp. As already discussed earlier, language competency is important both for the sender as well as the receiver in any communication process, and the lack of it will not only dilute the efficacy of the communication but might also lead to its failure. Some areas to be careful about are:
 - (a) **Interpretation of words:** Words play a vital role in communication, both spoken and written. Words can communicate a variety of meanings depending on the context. It is quite possible that the receiver of a message does not assign the same meaning to a word as the sender had intended. This may lead to miscommunication. For example, in the sentence, 'The government has agreed to bailout the company', the actual meaning of *bailout*—'providing financial aid'—may not get interpreted by the receiver in the same way if they are not able to differentiate between *bail* and *bailout*.
 - (b) **Bypassed instructions:** 'Bypassing' occurs if the sender and the receiver of the message attribute different meanings to the same word or use different words for the same meaning. For example, in the sentence, 'The auditor carefully assayed the balance sheet of the company', the actual meaning of *assayed*—'examined'—may get bypassed by the receiver if he or she is not able to differentiate between *assay* and *essay*.
 - (c) **Denotations and connotations:** Words have two types of meanings—denotative and connotative. Denotative meaning just informs and names of objects without indicating its positive or negative qualities. Words like *table*, *book*, *account*, and *meeting* are denotative by nature. Connotative meaning, on the other hand, contains qualitative judgments and personal reactions. Words like *honest*, *competent*,

cheap, sincere, etc., are connotative by nature. Some of these words like *honest, noble* and *sincere* have favourable connotations; others like *cowardly, slow*, and *incompetent* have unfavourable connotations. There also exist a large number of troublesome words that have favourable connotations in one context and unfavourable connotations in the other. One such word is *cheap*. Look at these two sentences:

The suppliers supplied us *cheap* stuff this time.
Many shops sell things *cheap* during the sale season.

In the first sentence, *cheap* refers to 'inferior quality' and has an unfavourable connotation while in the second sentence, it refers to 'reasonable prices' and is used favourably. Likewise, *fat cheque, free enterprise, huge profits* etc. can be interpreted differently in different contexts. It is because of the connotative meanings of the words that sometimes a remark originally intended as a compliment is interpreted as offending by the receiver.

The knowledge economy is powered by information. Still information overload tends to stress and overwhelm people.



6. Information overload: The knowledge economy is powered by information. There is so much information available that it is sometimes difficult to decide what to do with it. The information revolution, powered by the advances in computer and communication technologies, is dramatically exemplified by the growth of the Internet. The remarkable expansion of the Internet and long-distance access to journals and Web sites that provide in-depth information, have transformed the way we work today. However, there is a flip side of it as well. Too much information is as bad as too little because it reduces the receiver's ability to concentrate effectively on the most important messages. People facing an information overload sometimes tend to ignore major part of the messages, delay in responding to others, answer only partially to the messages, respond inaccurately to the messages, spend less time with each message, and respond only superficially to all messages.

7. Lack of the right attitude/collaborative effort: For successful communication, it is important that the sender does away with a judgmental-attitude (a preconditioned mindset towards others) and switch to a non-judgmental-attitude (an open minded, unbiased approach). A non-judgmental-attitude calls for trust and respect towards the sender's domain expertise—education and experience.

8. Overconfidence and underconfidence: Communication may also fail due to the receiver's overconfidence or underconfidence about a topic. Both situations are dangerous as an overconfident receiver may take the message delivered by the sender too lightly while an underconfident receiver may not even have guts to question or clarify the doubts related to the message.

Just like the sender, it is important that the receiver of the message is aptly qualified in the related field. An overqualified receiver may tend to get judgmental about the sender of the message while an underqualified receiver may not understand the message properly.

Likewise, the lack of EI may make the receiver insensitive or hyper-sensitive to the sender's emotions and state of mind. Below average EI may make the receiver unresponsive to the sender's message and also *unadaptive* to his own surroundings. Such a person would find himself alone in a crowd and would yearn for others' support in the hour of need. For example, a receiver responding unsympathetically to the message: 'the airplane crashed causing death of all the 150 passengers' would not only show his unresponsiveness, but also make him skeptical in the eyes of others who may doubt his intentions.

Environmental Communication Barriers

These factors are the ones present outside in the surroundings or external environment where communication takes place. They may be related with the noisy or non-conducive communication

climate; a rigid hierarchy in an organization, a physical or chronomatic (time-related) issue pertaining to a particular society/culture; an ethical or social concern, a technological glitch, etc. These environmental communication barriers may be caused due to various elements both within and beyond control, such as stuffy rooms with poor seating arrangements, a huge and unmanageable audience; a screeching microphone or excessively interruptive telephone/mobile phones; incompatible computer software or snail-paced Internet connection. For instance, a sender who wants to send an urgent message about his ill health barring him from going to work tries to call his colleague whose cell phone has been switched off and his office landline tele-

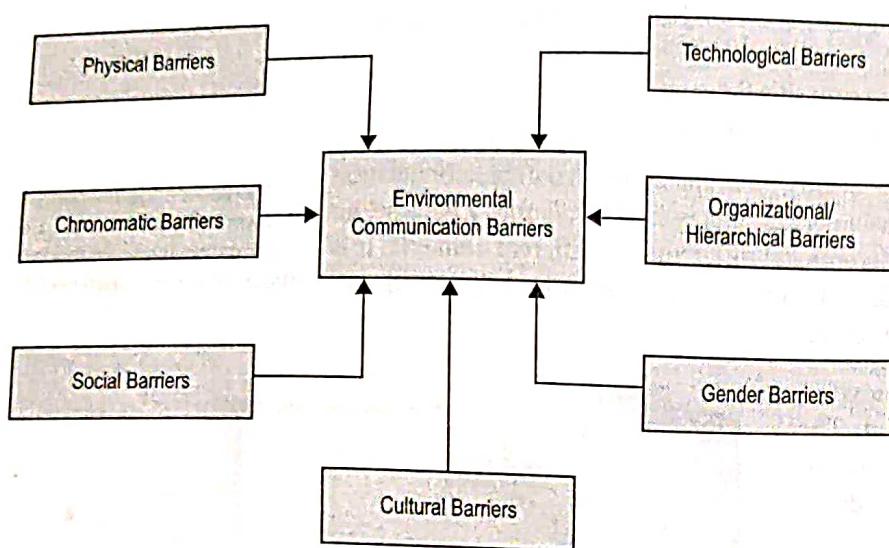


Fig. 2.5 Environmental Communication Barriers

phone is out of order, thus preventing him from sending his message to the desired destination.

Environmental communication barriers are of the following eight types—physical barriers, technological barriers, chronomatic barriers, organizational (hierarchical) barriers, social barriers, gender barriers, cultural barriers and ethical barriers (see Fig. 2.5).

Physical Barriers

These are the barriers that result from the physical presence or absence of any external element which may come in the way of communication. These barriers may be caused by factors such as different time zones of the sender and the receiver of the message, long distances, inappropriate seating arrangements, a non-productive ambience or a non-conducive surrounding. A non-conducive surrounding may include filthy, smelly, dark or inadequately ventilated venues, poor infrastructure, outdated equipment, inadequately trained staff, incompetency in dealing with new technology, overstaffing or understaffing at the workplace, distractions like background noise, poor lighting or an environment which is too hot or cold—all affect both the sender's and the receiver's concentration, which in turn interferes in the free flow of communication. For instance, if the place is noisy, the sender will be distracted from his message and whatever little he will communicate is unlikely to be received in the same way by the receiver.

Technological Barriers

In modern day organizations, technology is largely used to mediate communication. Gone are the days when doing even the easiest task called for the hardest labour. In today's world, where the smart computers can perform any task at the click of a mouse, our dependence on technology is all time high. A technical breakdown or even a small technical glitch may ruin the entire process of communication. For example, technical glitches were the main reason that resulted in the 2009's Common Admission Test (CAT) becoming a major problem—both for the aspirants as well as for those who conducted it. It was reported in the media that across the country there were 2.41 million candidates who were to take the test initially, but over 20,000 candidates could not take their test due to technical glitches. The reason given was that there were attacks by viruses like 'Conficker' and 'W32 Nimda'.⁸ Though technology-based communication such as phone conversations, text messages and e-mails have made communication easy for us but on the flip side, it has reduced the possibility of natural face-to-face interaction that is at the helm of any human communication. Without non-verbal cues such as eye contact, facial expressions, and body language, people are more likely to

misunderstand messages, causing the quality of communication to suffer. For example, a text message where all the words are in capital letters can be interpreted as an angry 'yelling' message, while the reality may be far from that.

Organizational (Hierarchical) Barriers

They refer to problems with structures or systems in place in an organization, such as inefficient information systems, lack of supervision or training, lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities, and other deficiencies in organizational design which make it unclear and confusing to know who to communicate with. In organizations, if the chain of command is not established or there is a lack of proper management/supervision, it is quite possible that there will be a lack in clarity regarding roles and responsibilities. This would make the staff uncertain about what is expected of them, thus, hindering communication—both intra- and inter-organizational. Some common types of organizational barriers are:

1. **Status consciousness:** It exists in most organizations and is one of the major barriers to effective communication. Frontline executives or other subordinates in the organizational hierarchy may feel hesitant about communicating any unpleasant information upward to their bosses. This may be because they may be either too conscious of their inferior status or too afraid of being snubbed as most status-conscious superiors think that consulting their juniors would be compromising their dignity. Status-consciousness proves to be a very serious barrier in face-to-face communication too. The subordinate feels shaky and nervous, fidgets when standing, falters in speech and fails in communicating the message correctly. The boss, on the other hand, reveals impatience and starts giving comments or advice before the subordinate has fully explained the case. Consequently, there is a total failure of communication and the subordinate feels frustrated, while the boss resumes work feeling that the subordinate has been inconsiderate and has *wasted* their time. Such communication failures can be averted if managers and other people in authority rise above the consciousness of their status and encourage their employees to talk freely. Mumbai based Godrej Properties Limited, a real estate company of the Godrej Industries Ltd. founded by Adi Godrej himself in 1990, has something called *Bedhadak Bolo Award* for its employees who speak fearlessly. The award is one of the key ingredients of the GPL culture.
2. **Message filtering:** In organizations, some messages are filtered or stopped altogether on their way up or down in the organizational hierarchy. Filtering may involve deleting or delaying negative information, or using subtler words so that events sound more favourable. Managers and supervisors usually filter communication to create a good impression about themselves. Filtering is most common in organizations that reward employees who communicate positive information among employees with strong career mobility aspirations. HDFC Standard Life Insurance, one of India's leading private life insurance companies, has developed something called *E-Sparsh* to take call on this issue. *E-Sparsh* is a single window for all queries related to employee concerns. If the query is not resolved in a predefined time, it will automatically convert into a grievance and raise it to higher authorities in the respective department.⁹

Chronomatic Barriers

It deals with the treatment of time. The concept of time in conducting business entails schedules, deadlines and appointments but these matters vary from individual to individual; organization to organization; country to country; and culture to culture. Chronomatic barriers refer to problems related with time, such as delay caused in receiving the message due to physical distance between the sender and the receiver, different time zones of the sender and receiver of the message, etc. For example, people in Germany and the USA see time as a way to plan the business day effectively, focussing on only one task during each scheduled period and viewing time as a limited commodity. However, executives from Latin America

and Asia see time as being more flexible. Meeting a deadline is less important than building a relationship. For such employees, a workday is not expected to follow a rigid, preset schedule.¹⁰

Social Barriers

Communication is one of the most important parts of the social life of human beings. People communicate to maintain relationships, complete tasks, exchange information and manage many other things. That being said, communication is not always easy and can cause undue stress and conflict when social issues prevent it. A number of social barriers that exist prevent individuals from communicating with each other and generally damage the value of communication. Mumbai headquartered HDFC, regarded as one of the Big Four banks of India, along with the State Bank of India, ICICI Bank and Punjab National Bank, has joined the *Corporate Whistleblower Initiative*, a third-party web-based reporting initiative aimed at facilitating secure and confidential communication. It can be accessed from anywhere and provides users with a simple method of communicating their concerns.¹¹

According to experts, one common social barrier found in organizations is *groupthink* a term introduced by the North American psychologist Janis in 1972 to explain an extreme type of social conformity occurring within close-knit groups. It refers to group overcohesiveness that causes defective decision-making. It occurs when a group makes faulty decisions because group pressures lead to a deterioration of ‘mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment’.¹² Groups affected by *groupthink* ignore alternatives and tend to take irrational actions that dehumanize other groups. This happens mostly when the group is under considerable pressure to make a quality decision. When pressures for unanimity seem overwhelming, group members become less motivated to realistically appraise the alternative courses of action available to them. Decisions shaped by *groupthink* have a low probability of achieving successful outcomes. Some examples of *groupthink* ‘fiascoes’ as studied by Janis include the USA’s failure to anticipate the attack on Pearl Harbour, the Bay of Pigs invasion, the escalation of the Vietnam War, and the ill-fated hostage rescue in Iran.¹³

Gender Barriers

Communication between men and women is affected by various biological, socio-economic and cultural factors. Studies say that male and female brains are structured to process information differently. This makes relations between women and men complex posing many communication challenges. Each gender has a distinctive communication pattern and often mistakenly assumes that the opposite gender thinks and acts as they do. This is where miscommunication arises because each side believes that they are communicating clearly based on their own communication patterns but they are not. American Express, which has around 43 per cent of women as its workforce, has taken initiatives like *The Women’s Interest Network* (WIN), an employee network which seeks to build a community that supports development of all women in the workplace through idea sharing and networking, thereby minimizing gender barriers. Likewise, GRACE, another initiative promotes professional development of women in the organization. Acknowledging and appreciating the specific needs of women in the workforce, the company has institutionalized platforms exclusively for women.¹⁴

Cultural Barriers

‘Culture is the relatively stable set of inner values and beliefs generally held by a group of people in a country or region and the noticeable impact those values and beliefs have on the peoples’ outward behaviours and environment’.¹⁵ To be even more precise, ‘culture is a shared system of beliefs, attitudes, values, expectations, and norms of behaviour’.¹⁶ When it comes to communication, different cultures communicate differently. Effective communication in a multi-cultural environment requires the ability and willingness to manage workplace diversity to overcome cultural barriers. People prefer to live in the company of other people with known habits and traits and it may be a challenging task to make people from different cultures work under the same roof. This is the reason why culture acts as a barrier to effective communication. We will discuss more in detail on this aspect of communication in later chapters.