

## **1.3 BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION**

A barrier is an obstacle that prevents something from getting through to its destination or receiver as intended. In communication, a barrier will prevent a message from travelling in a manner that gives it proper meaning. There exist many **barriers to communication** and these may occur at any stage in the communication process. According to an estimate, people in organizations typically spend over 75 % of their time in an interpersonal situation; thus it is no surprise to find that at the root of a large number of organizational problems is poor communication. This poor communication is caused by a large number of barriers. Barriers may lead to your message becoming distorted and you therefore risk wasting both time and money. Effective communication involves overcoming these barriers and conveying a clear and concise message.

### **1.3.1 Psychological Barriers**

The psychological state of the receiver will influence how the message is received. Every person has his own way of looking at the world, at people, at events and situations. No two persons possess accurately similar frames of reference. The following Socio-Psychological barriers arise in the minds of people :

- i. **Unjust assumptions** : People might make various assumptions based on what they see or perceive. A speaker, for example, incorrectly assumes that the conservatively dressed audience might not understand his modern ideas.
- ii. **Closed mind** : Certain people think that they know everything about a subject. Usually they are not prepared to accept that they could be mistaken. Many make



generalized statements like women cannot become superior to men or that all young people are irresponsible. An attitude of allness is an outcome of such biased approach.

i. **Halo and Horns effect** : Our communication with people depends on our past experience with them. For instance, if a student with a good past record says that he could not attend the test, as he was unwell, the teacher would believe him. This is the halo effect where because of the positive past experience, the present communication appears truthful and convincing. On the other hand, if a teacher has had an unfavourable experience with the student in the past and he gives the same reason for not attending the test, the teacher would not believe him. This is the horns effect. Due to such an attitude, communication with that person will never improve, even if the person with an unfavourable impression makes a sincere effort to improve.

v. **Emotions** : If someone has personal worries and is stressed, he may be preoccupied by personal concerns. In such a case, he would not be receptive to the message. Stress is an important factor influencing interpersonal relationships.

**Self image** : It refers to the way the individual looks at himself or the picture he has of himself. It is this 'Self Image' that makes us always defend our point of view and interpret messages in the way we wish to interpret them. Thus, we tend to listen attentively to those messages which give a boost to our self image and reject messages which threaten that self image.

**Status block** : Communication might be affected sometime due to differences in authority among the employees. For instance, a clerk will probably want to say a lot of things to the company President but when they actually meet and talk in an informal gathering, probably their communication would be strained and formal due to difference in status.

i. **Prejudice** : Prejudice is preconceived opinion about people that is not based on reason or actual experience. Prejudice results in negative feelings, stereotyped beliefs, and a tendency to discriminate against members of the group. An employer might hire an attractive woman over other qualified male candidates simply because he believes she is likely to bring in more sales. On the other hand a female firefighter might lose out on opportunities if the employer assumes that a woman would be physically weak as compared to a male and hence wouldn't be able to perform well at a job which requires physical strength.

i. **Resistance to change** : Although change is inevitable, people tend to resist it in a rational response based on self-interest. In today's economy, change is all-pervasive in organizations. It happens continuously, and often at a rapid speed. Because change has become an everyday part of organizational dynamics, employees who resist change can actually cripple an organization. One of the most common reasons



for resistance is fear of the unknown. Sometimes, change in organizations necessitates changes in skills, and some people feel that they won't be able to adapt to the new requirements and are hence threatened by change.

#### How to overcome Personal/Socio-psychological barriers :

- i. **Keep an open mind** : One should not be in a haste to make assumptions about people. Accept people and situations with an open mind.
- ii. **Be open to change** : Develop ideas without being rigid about your own perception; be open to learning about people who are different from you; avoid making premature judgments about people.
- iii. **Be sensitive** : Be sensitive to the emotional state and value systems of people.
- iv. **Build on positive experience** : Learn from unfavourable past experiences and try to create new positive experiences to improve communication.
- v. **Consciously focus** : Acknowledge your own personal distractions and consciously focus on the speaker.
- vi. **Accept yourself and others** : Feel comfortable and secure about your own capabilities and accept the capabilities of others.
- vii. **Open communication** : The effective communicator does not wait till resistance builds up against an intended change or innovation, but takes the people into confidence even at the planning stage. He listens to their point of view with respect, involves them in the change and explains the reason why the change is necessary.

#### 1.3.2 Physical Barriers

Physical barriers are easy to spot - doors that are closed, walls that are erected, and distance between people-all work against the goal of effective communication.

Following are some of the physical barriers :

- i. **External noise** : It becomes very difficult to pass on the message orally, when there is external noise. Sometimes loud music or traffic noise creates a barrier in the communication process.
- ii. **Environmental stress** : Wrong choice of font colours in a power point presentation might cause strain to the eyes of the viewer and the message might not be received properly. Similarly, high temperature, humidity, bad ventilation etc. may hamper the sending and receiving of messages.
- iii. **Physical stress** : Due to sleeplessness, ill health, consumption of drugs, mental strain etc., the communicator cannot interpret the message in a desired manner.
- iv. **Time** : The difference between the time zones of two countries often acts as a barrier to communication. So if an organization has clients in different parts of the world, communication will be difficult, if both parties are not able find a common time to



- communicate. Similarly, people working in the same organization, but in shifts, will find it difficult to communicate with each other.
- v. **Distance** : Physical barriers erected at work places like cubicles, cabins, partitions, large furniture, etc. can create the illusion of distance even in a small organization. This minimizes contact of employees with each other and can be a barrier to communication. On the other hand, actual physical distance between the communicators, especially when they are working in different branches across the country or the world, affects communication.
  - vi. **Intricate lines of communication** : In large organizations, the chains of communication are long and intricate. This increases chances of distortion, thus disrupting communication.
  - vii. **Ignorance of medium** : The user should be well conversant with the medium that is adopted for conveying the message. The use of unfamiliar medium would turn the medium itself into a barrier. For example, the uses of visual media like maps and charts to instruct workers, who are not familiar with maps and charts, would switch off their attention due to the lack of knowledge of the media.
  - viii. **Information overload** : If too many messages are jammed into a network at the same time, there might be a problem in transmission.

#### **How to overcome Physical barriers :**

- i. **Open layout plan** : While most agree that people need their own personal areas in the workplace, setting up an office to remove physical barriers is the first step towards opening communication. Many professionals who work in industries that thrive on collaborative communication, purposefully design their workspaces around an "open office" plan. This layout eschews cubicles in favour of desks grouped around a central meeting space. While each individual has their own dedicated work space, there are no visible barriers to prevent collaboration with their co-workers. This encourages greater openness and frequently creates closer working bonds.
- ii. **Minimize noise** : Though it might not be possible to eliminate noise completely, it can definitely be minimized. Organizations located in cities or noisy places can make sound proof arrangements to minimize disturbance.
- iii. **Use of technology** : Use of technology and modern communication techniques like video conferencing can combat the distance barrier.
- iv. **Mutual adjustment** : With mutual adjustment, the problem of different time zones can be worked out. Both parties can communicate at a mutually accepted time.
- v. **Streamline procedures** : In large organizations, unnecessary delays can be avoided by streamlining procedures.



- vi. **Provide environmental comfort** : To minimize discomfort due to environmental conditions, make the ambience comfortable by providing sound proof rooms, air conditioning, good seating arrangement, etc. to increase better reception of messages.

### 1.3.3 Mechanical Barriers

Mechanical barriers include any disturbances, which interfere with the physical transmission of the message. Mechanical communication barriers are technical sources of interference in the communication process. A mechanical barrier stems from a problem in machinery or instruments used to transmit the message. Following are some of the mechanical barriers :

- i. **Defects in machinery** : Mechanical instruments and machines require constant maintenance. Over time and with regular use, their ability to properly function breaks down. Defects in the machinery may also cause noise that creates a mechanical communication barrier. In mass communication, mechanical barriers include smeared ink on the printed matter, a rolling screen on TV or a type too small to be read in the newspaper.
- ii. **Transmission interruption** : There are many forms of transmitted communication; email, fax machines, pagers, cell phones, radios and satellite communication. All of these operate by receiving a transmitted signal. If for any reason there is an interruption in receiving the signal, there is also an interruption in the service. The duration and frequency of interruptions are based on the source of the signal. These interruptions are mechanical communication barriers.
- iii. **No access to vital devices/machines** : Sometimes certain devices or instruments such as televisions, radios, and telephones are required for communication. Also certain devices are used for personal communication, such as hearing aids, amplifiers, signaling devices, Braille and special needs telephones. Without these tools, there is a mechanical communication barrier.
- iv. **Power failure** : Electrically generated devices used in communication are only useful if there is a steady source of power. Some areas may depend on electricity that is generated by a single source. Power failures may mean a longer period without communication in areas such as these. Any power failure may cause a mechanical communication barrier.

#### How to overcome Mechanical barriers :

- i. **Ensure good working condition** : The communicator should ensure that the communication devices are in good working condition. So, a speaker should ensure that the microphone or the projector is functioning properly.
- ii. **Arrange adequate backup** : If power cuts are frequent, organizations should provide for adequate backup so that work is not affected.



### 1.3.4 Semantic/Linguistic Barriers

Semantics is related to meanings of words. Words are symbols, and therefore limited because they cannot have precisely the same meaning for everyone. Since words can mean different things, their different meanings may block communication. Language barriers refer to the situation when a person is not able to convey his ideas because of language differences. It might be at the listener or speaker's end. Some of the linguistic barriers are :

- i. **Existence of different languages** : In our country itself we see the existence of several languages and dialects. This might be a barrier to communication, especially in the absence of a common language. In such cases, people rely on non-verbal communication to convey their messages.
- ii. **Faulty translation** : In most cases, it is seen that when people translate a language, they apply the grammatical rules of their mother tongue to that language. This results in literal translation of words without understanding the deeper meaning.
- iii. **Use of jargon** : The term 'jargon' refers to specialized vocabulary that people belonging to a professional group might use. It should be used only when communicating with people belonging to the same profession. When used with a layperson, it might cause confusion and misunderstanding.
- iv. **Connotative and denotative meaning of words** : Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a word, the "dictionary definition." For example, the denotative meaning of the word *snake* in a dictionary, is "any of numerous scaly, legless, sometimes venomous reptiles having a long, tapering, cylindrical body and found in most tropical and temperate regions."  
Connotation, on the other hand, refers to the associations that are connected to a certain word or the emotional suggestions related to that word. The connotative meanings of a word exist together with the denotative meanings. The connotations for the word *snake* could include 'evil' or 'danger'.
- v. **Multiple meanings** : Very often the same word might mean different things; for instance, let us look at some of the meanings of the word 'fare'. It would mean the price of the ride, as in *bus fare*, the person paying for the ride, as in *only three fares on the bus*, to describe the type being offered, as in *entertainment fare*, or *Mediterranean fare* to turn out or happen, as in *how did you fare in your exams*. The existence of several meanings of the same word can cause confusion.
- vi. **Homonyms** : Two or more words that have the same sound or spelling but differ in meaning. Generally, the term *homonym* refers both to homophones (words that are pronounced the same but have different meanings, such as *which* and *witch*) and to homographs (words that are spelled the same but have different meanings, such as "*bow* your head" and "tied in a *bow*")



vii. **Different accents** : Most individuals carry the influence of the mother tongue on other languages they learn. For instance, A South Indian might speak English with a South Indian accent. Apart from regional influences, the accent may vary from country to country. Sometimes, it may become difficult for a Britisher to understand the American or the Indian accent. This makes communication a tedious process.

#### **How to overcome Semantic barriers :**

- i. **Learn new languages** : Try to learn new languages, especially if you are planning to visit or relocate to a new place. At least knowing some key words would aid communication.
- ii. **Speak slowly and clearly** : Focus on clearly enunciating and slowing down your speech. Rushing through your communication often takes more time, as it can result in miscommunication. You will ultimately have to invest additional time in clearing up the confusion.
- iii. **Ask for clarification** : Sometimes when people haven't understood the other person, they assume the message and interpret it according to their convenience. Instead, if things are clarified, the process of communication would become smooth.
- iv. **Frequently check for understanding** : Check both that you've understood what's been said and that others have fully understood you. The speaker can ask questions to check whether the listener has understood the message.
- v. **Limit the use of jargon** : Limit the use of technical terms and other organizational language that may not be understood by others. If you use them in written communication, provide in parentheses a description of what these are.
- vi. **Provide information via multiple channels** : To minimize the misunderstandings caused by linguistic variations, use multiple channels of communication. So presentations could be followed up with written material or phone calls with emails that summarize what has been said. When possible, before oral presentations, provide advance written information so that non-native speakers of the language can get familiar with the content.

#### **1.3.5 Socio - Cultural Barriers**

Socio-cultural communication occurs when a person from one culture sends a message to a person from another culture. Socio-cultural miscommunication occurs when the person from the other culture does not receive the sender's intended message. The greater the differences between the sender's and the receiver's cultures, the greater the chances for socio-cultural miscommunication. Cultural barriers can occur in the following areas :

- i. **Language** : Even when people speak the same language, the same words or their slight variations can mean different things to people from different cultures. For



instance, when the conservative British boss asked a new, young American employee if he would like to have an early lunch, the employee answered, "Yeah, that would be great!" The boss, hearing the word 'yeah' instead of the word 'yes', assumed that the employee was rude, ill-mannered, and disrespectful.

**1. Dressing :** Each country has its own dress code for different occasions. People from countries where the dressing is conservative, would appreciate outsiders following a similar dress code for formal occasions. In India, saris are considered formal while in the West, women might wear formal skirts or trousers. Not following the dress code might invite disapproving looks and would cause prejudice in people's minds.

**2. Body language :** Each culture has its own rules about proper behaviour which affect verbal and nonverbal communication. Whether one looks the other person in the eye or not; whether one says what one means overtly or talks around the issue; how close the people stand to each other when they are talking, all of these and many more are rules of politeness which differ from culture to culture.

**3. Food :** People from different cultures have their unique food habits and preferences. Those who prefer vegetarian food might not be comfortable sitting next to a person having non vegetarian food. There are differences not only in the type of food but also the manner of eating food. In cultures where spoons, forks and knives are used for eating food, eating food using bare hands might be seen as uncouth.

**Use of space :** In some cultures, people stand close to each other during communication. For instance, the Arabs stand quite close to each other while communicating and often touch the other person while speaking. If a person does not stand close, it is seen as being rude or not being involved in the conversation. On the other hand, the Britishers are known to keep a distance and would feel uncomfortable if people stand too close to them.

**Use of time :** Some cultures are conscious of time and punctuality is appreciated. In other cultures, time does not play a very crucial role and being late is socially accepted. For instance, if an American has invited guests home for dinner at 8, he would be offended if they reached late. In India or the Middle East, time is treated more casually and reaching after the scheduled time is socially accepted.

**Attitudes and behaviour :** People of certain cultures might believe that their culture is superior to the others. They might look down on the other person's food habits, dressing or value systems. This would prejudice them against people of other cultures and hamper their communication. Cultures provide people with ways of thinking, seeing, hearing, interpreting and behaving. Different cultures regulate the display of emotion differently. In some cultures emotions are expressed openly while in others people keep their emotions hidden.