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# Barriers to Communication

## DEFINITION OF NOISE

Imagine you are a junior executive who has just joined as a trainee in an automobile company. You go to meet your boss, to seek permission for visiting the automobile exhibition being held in Delhi. While you are talking, two of your colleagues also arrive to get your boss's signature on some bills. You fall silent while he signs the bills. After they leave, you resume talking but you find that your boss has not really grasped what you have said earlier. You later analyse this situation, and realise that your colleagues' intervention led to your boss's lack of concentration. As the sender, you had patiently tried to express your wish. But because of 'the noise' or interruption by your colleagues, the receiver, your boss, could not decode your message fully. Hence the communication process failed.

All of us have come across such situations while communicating with parents, friends, or colleagues. Just as we realise the importance of certain resources only when there is a shortage, we become aware of the importance of effective communication only when there is a breakdown in the process. But with conscientious efforts, we can avoid such failures in our communication and make it more effective. The discussion in this chapter on various types of communication barriers will enable you to identify and understand them. This will enable you to overcome such barriers and become a better communicator.

*Communication is effective only if it creates the desired impact on the receiver.*

We all know that effective communication is the omphalos of all the business activities of the organization. Even a slight break in communication flow can lead to misunderstanding of the message. Communication is effective only if it creates the desired impact on the receiver. *It has been found that technical communication is as difficult, if not more, as general-purpose communication.* Often, managers get frustrated in their efforts, and end up saying that nobody in the organization understands them. Many employees fail to listen attentively during meetings, or send incomprehensible business letters. Such situations arise due to inadequate communication skills.

There are numerous such problems associated with communication. These need to be addressed in order to ensure that no hiatus occurs in the communication cycle. Problems usually arise because wrong assumptions are made about the person to whom the message is being sent and *sometimes about the message itself.* For example, if the sender of the message is talking about a technical proposal he would be wrong if he makes assumptions about the level of technical knowledge of the receiver. The problem can be resolved to a great extent if the sender of the message analyses his message thoroughly and anticipates the likely response before sending it. This will considerably reduce the chances of communication failure.

If you find a communication error in your message, how should you rectify it? Try to solve the problem immediately in an appropriate manner. You could also think about how such errors could be avoided in future.

If your communication fails to evoke the desired response, following these five steps will set you back on the right path:

- Identify the problem
- Find the cause
- Work on alternative solutions
- Opt for the best solution
- Follow up religiously

The first step is the most difficult—identifying the problem. You first realise there is a problem when you do not receive the desired feedback. Next, in order to identify and analyse the problem, it is mandatory that you carefully analyse the feedback. For example, your boss has asked you to write a bimonthly report and until the next month you have not produced one. The boss reprimands you for the delay. You reply that you were asked to produce the report bimonthly. The problem here is, to you the term *bimonthly* meant *once in two months*, whereas to your boss it meant *twice in a month*. Later, you look up the dictionary and find that *bimonthly* means *once in two months* as well as *twice a month!*

Having identified the problem, you come to the next step of finding out what caused it. In this situation, we could say it was the choice of words. The third step is to explore possible solutions. In this case, a way out would be to choose the

words which are more specific in their meaning. Be aware of the subtleties of the language. After thinking through the alternatives, apply the best solution that not only solves the problem, but also does not create any new difficulties. Hence, instead of using the troublesome term *bimonthly*, you can use either *twice in a month* or *once in a fortnight*. After successfully completing all the four steps, you come to the last step, namely *following rigorously*. This means that you must implement the best solution relentlessly. Having once come across a particular communication barrier, you should make a conscious effort to never let it crop up again.

Let us now look in detail at the term *noise* before going on to consider the different barriers to communication.

### What is noise?

**Noise here does not mean cacophony, but a break in the communication process.**

Any interference in the message sent and message received leads to the production of 'noise'. The term communication barrier, or that which inhibits or distorts the message, is an expansion of the concept of noise. Noise here does not mean cacophony, but a break in the communication process. If noise occurs because of technological factors, it is a smaller problem as it can be removed by correcting the technological faults. However, if the noise is due to human error, the parties involved in the communication process need to take corrective measures.

A barrier acts like a sieve, allowing only a part of the message to filter through; as a result, the desired response is not achieved. To communicate smoothly and effectively in an organization, irrespective of your position, you need to know how the barriers operate, why they cause misunderstandings and how to mitigate their negative impact.

## CLASSIFICATION OF BARRIERS

How often have you said, 'I meant to say this and not that'? Even with the best intentions, communication barriers crop up and our written and spoken messages are misunderstood. If we classify these barriers according to the processes of message formation and delivery, we get them at three levels:

- Intrapersonal
- Interpersonal
- Organizational

### Intrapersonal Barriers

Individuals are unique because of their idiosyncrasies. This is mainly because of differences in experience, education, value, and personality. Each of us interpret the same information in different ways as our thinking varies. Certain common

causes are responsible for the an individual's inbuilt barriers. Let us explore the causes listed below that lead to these intrapersonal barriers:

- Wrong assumptions
- Varied perceptions
- Differing background
- Wrong inferences
- Impervious categories
- Categorical thinking

### Wrong Assumptions



'Take the medicine only SOS.'

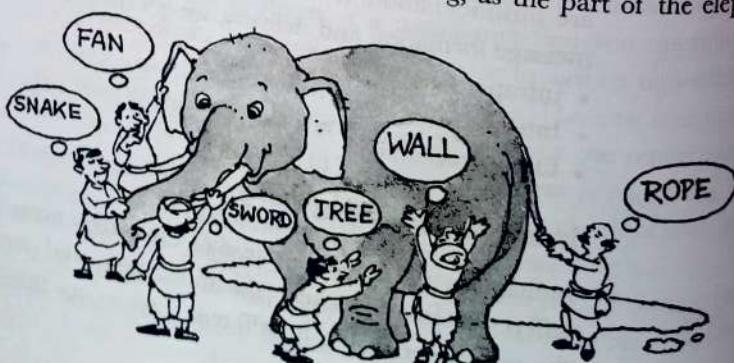
Many barriers stem from wrong assumption. For example, when a doctor tells his patient that he has to take some medicine only 'SOS', without knowing whether the patient understands the term 'SOS', it creates a barrier in their communication. Here the doctor has made a wrong assumption about his patient's level of knowledge. Wrong assumptions are generally made because the sender or the receiver does not have adequate knowledge about each other's background. Both parties entertain certain false notions, which are fixed in their mind. Sometimes the speaker does not realize that backgrounds, education, and experiences of different people can be different. A skilled communicator keeps these issues in mind to prevent them from becoming barriers.

To enhance your communication skills, it is necessary to know the background of your audience and can accordingly tailor that information to construct your message.

To strengthen your skills as a communicator try to put yourself in the shoes of the listener. This exercise will prevent making wrong assumptions about the recipient.

### Varied Perceptions

We all know the story of the six blind men and their description of an elephant. The elephant is perceived by each man as a fan, a rope, a wall, a sword, a snake and a tree. None of the blind men is wrong, as the part of the elephant he touches.



touched by each man was compared with various objects. This is how an individual perceives reality.

Similarly, individuals in an organization also perceive situations in different ways. Let us take the case of an altercation between two individuals. If you are close to one of them, you are likely to be biased. You may perceive your friend's arguments as correct, and hence, may not be able to appreciate his opponent's point of view. It is all a matter of perception. The best way to overcome this barrier is to step back and take a wider perspective of the issue.

### Differing Backgrounds

*To enhance your communication skills, it is necessary to know the background of your audience. You can accordingly use that information to construct your message.*

No two persons have a similar background. Even siblings differ in their genetic inheritance. People vary in terms of their education, culture, language, environment, age, sex, financial status, etc. Our background plays a significant role in how we interpret the message. At times, something not experienced by you earlier will be difficult to interpret or appreciate. Think of a class where the professor talks about his rock climbing adventure. Those students who have had the experience of trekking may be able to appreciate the professor's talk, while others who have never been trekking may not find it interesting at all.

A computer company representative would not make much sense to a group of doctors if in his presentation he goes into details about the hardware aspects of the computer that he has plans to install.

To enhance your communication skills, it is necessary to know the background of your audience. You can accordingly use that information to construct your message.

*Empathy or identification with another person is the solution to this barrier. Make an effort to understand where the listener can find it difficult to comprehend the message because of the difference between your background and that of the listener. Use language understood by the receiver to avoid ambiguity and reduce multiple meanings in your communication. The meaning of the word resides in the mind of speaker; therefore, one ought to be cautious while using words.*



*'While on a climb ... sunglasses save you from glare ... Jumar helps you to pull yourself ....'*

### Confusables

Common groups of words are sometimes confused or ignored by users. *Ability* is a skill that you have mastered through study or practice. *Capacity* refers to innate talent. If something *affects* you, it has an effect on you. To *effect* something however means to make something happen: 'The new Management wanted to *effect* drastic changes, but the unions felt these would *affect* workers.'

The multiple meanings of a word increases astronomically the problem communication barriers. A word can have several connotations and definitions. The more a word is prone to multiple meanings, the greater are the chances of being misunderstood. A conscientious speaker is careful to explain his message context by rephrasing and repeating words that can be confusing.

### When writing or speaking:

1. Think of your audience. How well do they understand the language? How much do they know about your logic?
2. Select your words with care, especially technical terms. Words must be suitable to your audience's language skills.
3. If you *have* to use slightly difficult or unfamiliar words, try to explain their part of your communication.
4. Don't fall into the trap, however, of oversimplifying your language; the audience could get put off if you use words that sound babyish.

Feedback serves as an effective barometer to find out if the intended message has been put across. Ask the receiver to paraphrase the message and also ask questions on what was said. Even if you have an extensive vocabulary, never use words merely to impress. Rather use them to express your ideas as simply and clearly as possible.

### Wrong Inferences

You have returned from a business trip and you find that two of your colleagues are absent. They do not turn up for several days. Since there is a recession on, you draw an inference that they have been laid off. The fact is that they have been promoted and sent to another department. This is an example of *fact-inference confusion*. It has happened because you failed to distinguish between what actually exists and what you had assumed to exist.

Inferences are more dramatic than facts, and for this reason they give more scope for gossip and rumour to burgeon. Inferences supported by facts are essential for professionals when they analyse material, solve problems and plan procedures. Systems analysts, marketing specialists, advertisers, architects, engineers, designers and others must work on various premises and draw inferences after collecting factual data. When presenting any inference in the course of your work,

could use qualifiers such as 'evidence suggest', or 'in my opinion' to remind yourself and the receiver that this is not yet established as fact.

### Impervious Categories

In general, we react positively to information only if it is in consonance with our own views and attitudes. Conversely, when we receive information that does not conform to our personal views, habits and attitudes, or appears unfavourable to us, we tend to react negatively or even disbelieve. Rejection, distortion, and avoidance are three common, undesirable, and negative reactions to unfavourable information.

Advances in communication and technologies are so rapid today that many people have difficulty in quickly adapting themselves to these developments. Instead of taking advantage of these developments that expedite the communication process, they tend to resist and criticize them. This is a result of having a closed mind. Such people are called misoneists.

They tend to ignore variations and differences, which lead to unreliable conclusions. In some people, certain prejudices are so deeply embedded in the psyche that these cannot be challenged.

Similarly, people who are very rigid in their opinions may face problems in communicating effectively. For example, one of your fellow students may think that only students of science are good in reasoning; another might be of the opinion that young executives are more efficient than older ones. Such people fall into impervious categories, because they may not be able to accept any deviation from their points of view.

### Categorical Thinking

People who feel that they 'know it all' are called *pansophists*. This type of thinking exists in people who feel that they know everything about a particular subject, and therefore refuse to accept any further information on that topic. For example, in a General Body meeting of your organization, you are to be briefed about the annual budget. However, you do not pay attention because you feel you have already been briefed about it by your secretary the previous day. Later you propose that new vehicles have to be bought. Imagine your embarrassment when you realize that the topic was discussed and a decision had already been taken in the General Body meeting. This type of thinking can pose a major barrier, leading to a failure in communication. In such instances, the receivers refuse information because of their 'know-it-all' attitude.

The clue to detecting this barrier in others and ourselves is the use of words like *all*, *always*, *everybody*, *everything*, *every time* and their opposites like *none*, *never*, *nobody*, and *nothing*. If a message contains too many of these words, then there is a fair chance of the communication getting distorted. To avoid this barrier, substitute

these words with phrases like 'in most situations' or 'likely'. Label your opinion with phrases like, 'it appears to me' or 'the evidence indicates'. If your data is sufficient, it is better to admit that you are unaware of the rest of the information rather than stonewalling.

To sum up, good communicators should:

- Be non-judgemental
- Be empathetic
- Not assume anything
- Stick to the subject
- Listen and above all paraphrase

However, you must remember that the generalization does not always hold good in all situations.

## Interpersonal Barriers

Intrapersonal barriers stem from an individual's attitudes or habits, whereas interpersonal barriers occur due to the inappropriate transaction of words between two or more people. The two broad categories into which this barrier can be classified are:

- Inefficiency in communication skills
- Negative aspect nurturing in the climate

Interpersonal barriers creep in as a result of the limitations in the communication skills of encoder or decoder, or both. In addition, they may also occur due to some disturbance in the channel. If there are two people involved in communication, the traits that distinguish them as individuals can be the cause of a communication problem.

In a business environment, we neither attempt to change these traits, nor do we do it; however, we can understand the role of differences among individuals that lead to communication breakdowns. The most common reasons for interpersonal barriers are:

- Limited vocabulary
- Incongruity of verbal and nonverbal messages
- Emotional outbursts
- Communication selectivity
- Cultural variations
- Poor listening skills
- Noise in the channel

### Limited Vocabulary

An inadequate vocabulary can be a major hindrance in communication. At times, your pen falters, or your tongue fumbles as you search for the exact word or phrase. In your communication, the connotative and denotative meanings of words

- Some**
1. Be  
we  
fam
  2. Dic  
wor  
wor
  3. A w  
you  
thes
  4. Who  
is a  
their
  5. Soci  
socia  
langu
  6. Jarg
  7. New  
being  
to try  
ridicu
  8. Sente  
vocab
  9. Unde  
work.
  10. Enjoy  
various  
words'  
and w

**Some pointers to good word usage:**

- 1. Be positive** We all have a 'passive vocabulary'—words we know but never use. There are also words we have read or have a vague idea about. Try shifting these words into the vocabulary that you are familiar with and use.
- 2. Dictionary and Thesaurus** These are invaluable tools. Use a dictionary to check the meanings of words. Make sure you can use it easily and confidently. A thesaurus will give you all the options to a word, so that you can choose the best one for the occasion.
- 3. A wide choice** Remember, English gives you several choices of words for a single meaning. When you write, don't opt for the first word that comes to mind. Make an effort to think of other words. Use a thesaurus to help you in your work.
- 4. Who is your audience?** When speaking or writing, always keep your audience in mind. Communication is a two-way street. Use words that are in keeping with your audience's level of language skills and their knowledge of the subject.
- 5. Social setting** Do you have an informal or formal relationship with your audience? Words that suit one social setting could be disastrous in another and ruin your communication, however accurate your language may be. Choose your style of speaking or writing according to the occasion.
- 6. Jargon** Unless your target audience is in the know, jargon tends to put off people. Avoid it!
- 7. New words** Just as words fall into disuse and vanish from the language, new words are constantly being added. Some words will last and become widely used; others will fade away. While it is interesting to try out new words, be wary of trying to sound 'fashionable' all the time, or you will end up looking ridiculous.
- 8. Sentence construction** Learn how words work in sentences before you can start developing your vocabulary. This will greatly benefit you, especially in writing.
- 9. Understand word structure** Many words have common 'building blocks'—try to figure out how these work. Also try to understand how common prefixes and suffixes are used in constructing new words.
- 10. Enjoy the language!** English is an amazingly creative, flexible language, capable of assimilating various influences and expressing subtleties of thought. As Thomas Carlyle said, 'Be not the slave of words'. Don't let words scare you—rather, get a hold on them and enjoy using them in your speaking and writing.

words should be absolutely clear to the receiver. During your speech, if you are at a loss for words, your communication will be very ineffective, and you will leave a poor impression on the audience. On the other hand, if you have a varied and substantial vocabulary, you can create an indelible impression on your listeners.

Do remember also that merely having a good vocabulary is of no use unless the communicator knows how to use it. Therefore, one should make constant efforts to increase one's vocabulary by regularly reading a variety of books and listening to native speakers of the language.

### **Incongruity of Verbal and Non-verbal Messages**

Imagine a situation where your CEO introduces the newly recruited middle level manager to the other employees. In a small speech, he conveys the message that he is very delighted to have the new manager appointed in his office. However,



'Did whatever I said in the last half hour make any sense to you?'

Actions speak louder than words, and thus, non-verbal cues provide a deeper insight into the sender's message. Ignoring non-verbal cues or misinterpreting them can result in the message being completely misunderstood. Thus, one should not only try to accurately gauge others' non-verbal cues but also be aware of one's own body language.

Generalizations, based on assumptions about physical appearance or stereotypes, can also lead to severe communication barriers. *Physical appearance often serves as one of the most important non-verbal cues. First impressions regarding people are made on the basis of physical appearance.* For instance, people initially formed negative impressions of Einstein because of his haggard appearance. It is important to remember that physical appearance can have a great impact on any kind of conversation. Guidelines to improve your appearance:

- Dress according to the occasion
- Wear neat and clean clothes
- Choose an appropriate hairstyle
- Wear clean and polished shoes

While interpretation of non-verbal cues requires keen observation, there are also pitfalls to guard against. For instance, there is great disparity in the use of interpretation of non-verbal messages across countries and cultures. For example, in Kenya, a mother-in-law and a son-in-law avoid eye contact. In fact they turn their backs to each other. In America, this would be a sign of disrespect.

In brief, your non-verbal cues should consistently match your verbal message, adding to their effectiveness and enhancing your image as a competent and interesting communicator.

the expression on his face shows just the opposite of what he is saying. The stark difference between the verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication leaves his listeners feeling confused and puzzled. A communicator should acclimatize himself to communication environment, think from the angle of the listener, then communicate.

Misinterpreted non-verbal communication acts as another barrier to effective information gathering. Non-verbal communication enhances and enlivens verbal communication.



### Emotional Outburst

Imagine that you are the President of a well-established company. There are rumours floating amongst your employees that you have indulged in fraudulent activities. You are fully aware that these rumours are baseless. However,

you are asked to address the same employees, you are unable to put your point across, as you are flushed with anger. Despite the fact that you are a confident public speaker, your communication failed as you were overwhelmed by your emotions.

In most cases, a moderate level of emotional involvement intensifies communication, making it more personal. However, excessive emotional involvement can be an obstacle in communication. For example, extreme anger can create such an emotionally charged environment that rational discussion is just not possible. Likewise, prejudice, stereotyping, and boredom all hinder effective communication. Positive emotions like happiness and excitement also interfere in communication, but to a lesser extent than negative feelings.

Emotions are an integral part of our being, whether in business or personal encounters. By sharpening self-awareness, intuition, and empathy, emotions can help in developing an environment highly conducive to good communication.

Yet, situations often arise where people react negatively. Depending on their nature and the situation, this negative reaction may either be classified as hostile or defensive. Hostility can be considered as a move to counter-attack the threat, whereas defensiveness is resistance to it. Both occur in situations where the receiver of the message perceives some kind of threat. Both these responses have an extremely negative impact on the communication. Messages are either misinterpreted, ignored, or overreacted to by people displaying such behaviour. Those who witness such behaviour are most likely to lower their opinion about the sender of such messages.

It is important to maintain one's composure in all kinds of communications. Viewing issues from different perspectives helps develop objectivity and rational thinking, which in turn can eliminate many of the causes of hostility or defensiveness.

If you are confronted with such negative behaviour, it is essential that you do not retaliate. The person displaying these emotions should be calmed down. He should preferably be taken to a quiet place to try and sort out the problem that caused his emotions to spin out of control.

Usually, in such exchanges, the volume of both the sender and receiver increases, with stress more on the volume than on the message. Therefore, it is important that the situation be checked at the outset, when the volume increases.

### Communication Selectivity

If you are the receiver in a communication process, and you pay attention only to a part of the message, you are imposing a barrier known as *communication selectivity*. You do this because you are interested only in that part of the message which may be of use to you. In such a situation, the sender is not at fault. It is the receiver who breaks the flow of communication.



Take for example, a meeting held by the chairman of a company. He called all his senior executives from various divisions—production, marketing, personnel, etc. During the meeting he discusses diverse topics. He may not be able to get across the entire message to each one of the participants unless he gets their undivided attention. If the production manager and marketing manager pay attention only to matters related to their respective areas, they may not be able to get the total perspective of what the chairman is communicating. Communication selectivity may act as a barrier in written forms of communication as well. *When you read a story, if you read only certain parts and omit others, you are creating this barrier.*

### Cultural Variations

This is one of the predominant factors in communication failure. As businesses are increasing across national boundaries to compete on a global scale, the composition of global and domestic work force has changed drastically. European, Asian, and American firms have expanded their businesses worldwide to create international ties through partnership, collaborations, and affiliations. The management employees of such companies need to closely observe the laws, customs, and business practices of their host countries, while dealing with their multinational work force. To compete successfully in today's globalized business environment, one must overcome the communication inadequacy arising from different languages and cultures.

This holds good in the area of education as well. You will prove to be a successful communicator abroad, during the course of your higher studies, if you take time to understand the culture of the educational campus in which you will be studying. Your success, whether as a student or as a professional, lies in knowing the business practices, social customs, and etiquette of a particular country.

### Poor Listening Skills

A common obstacle to communication is poor listening habits. We should remember that listening and hearing are not the same. Hearing is a passive process, while listening requires careful attention and accurate decoding of the signals received from the speaker. Misunderstanding and conflicts can be minimized if people listen to the message with attention. The various distractions that hinder listening can be emotional disturbances, indifference, aggressiveness, and wandering attention.

Sometimes, an individual is so engrossed in his own thoughts and worries that he is unable to concentrate on listening. If a superior goes on shifting the papers on his desk while listening to his subordinate, without making eye contact with the latter, he pays divided attention to the speaker's message. This divided attention adversely affects the superior-subordinate relationship, besides distorting the communication.