

Segment: Basic Principles of Communication

Topic: Barriers to Communication

Barriers to Communication

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Barriers to Communication



Introduction

In the previous topic, we discussed certain key elements of the communication process. Each of the key elements contributes to the success of communication. In other words, communication can go wrong if any of the key elements go wrong.

In this topic, we will examine some of the general problems that come in the way of smooth communication and ways of overcoming these problems.



Learning Objectives

At the end of this topic, you will be able to:

- list the barriers to communication
- identify the ways to overcome the barriers to communication.

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1. Barriers to Communication

Communication fails when the message received is not identical to the message that is sent. Several factors could interfere with the exchange of messages.

‘Noise’ refers to all these factors that disrupt communication and can be classified under the following types:

- **Physical noise** – Distracting sounds, poor acoustics, or just information overload could interfere with the listening process.
- **Physiological noise** – Hearing or other disabilities, fatigue, or physical illness could come in the way of both speaking and listening.
- **Psychological noise** – Sometimes emotions within the sender, or receiver such as preoccupations, hostility, fear or lack of interest could interfere with the speaking or listening process.

There are many other barriers to communication, an understanding, and analysis of these are needed before coming up with ways to eliminate or minimise them. Figure 1 depicts the barriers to communication.

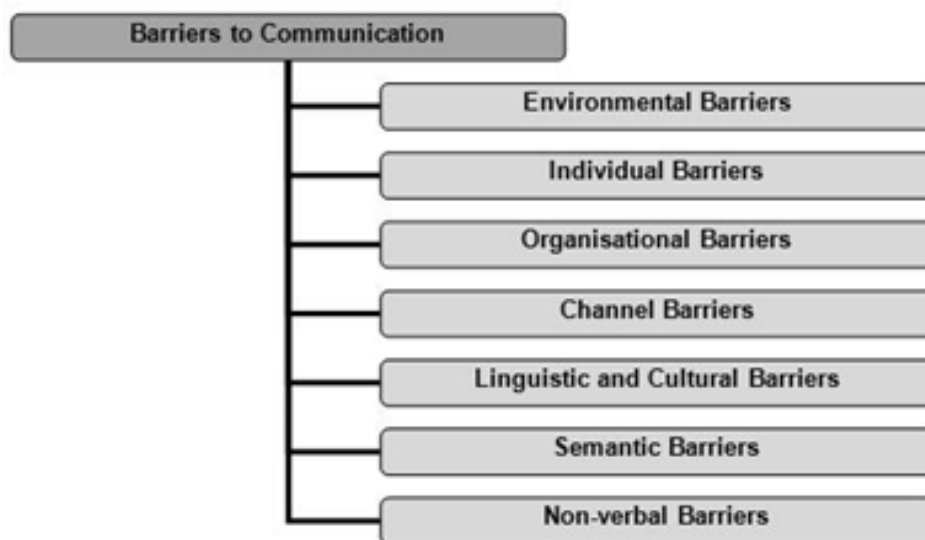


Fig. 1.: Barriers to Communication

As shown in figure 1, the barriers to communication may be classified as follows:

- **Environmental barriers** – An environmental barrier is the same as physical noise, which could be in the form of distracting sounds, an overcrowded room, poor facilities, and acoustics, all of which may hinder the ability to listen and understand the message.

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- **Individual barriers** – A major barrier to interpersonal communication is a tendency to judge, evaluate, approve, or disapprove the views of another person. This happens particularly in situations where we have strong feelings about something. In such cases, we tend to block out the communication and form our viewpoints.
- **Organisational barriers** – In organisations that are too hierarchical, that is, where there are multiple 'layers', messages may have to pass through many levels before they finally reach the receiver. Each level may add to, modify or completely change the message, so much so that it becomes distorted by the time it reaches the intended receiver. In other words, there is likely to be loss of meaning and the message may not reach the receiver in the same way as it was intended by the sender.

The following example illustrates an organisational barrier to communication. By the time the message is passed down from the Chief to the lower level executives, it is distorted completely, to the extent that the original message is interpreted differently by each level in the organisation.

The Chief of the Space Centre gets to know about the possibility of seeing Halley's Comet and decides that the entire organisation should witness this spectacle. He sends the following memo to the Director.

Tomorrow evening, at 20:00 hours, we will be able to see Halley's Comet in the sky through the naked eye. Since this is not an everyday event, everyone at the Centre should assemble outside in their best clothes to watch it. If it rains, we will not be able to see it very well, in which case everyone should assemble in the Canteen.

To Director

By order of the Chief

The Director then sends the following memo to various Executive Directors:

By order of the Chief, we will be able to see 'Halley's Comet' at 20:00 hrs, tomorrow evening. If it is raining, we shall not be able to see it very well on site, in our best clothes. In that case, the disappearance of the Comet will be followed through in the Canteen. This is something which we cannot see happening every day.

To
Executive Directors

Director

The Executive Director sends out memos to the Heads of Departments as follows:

By order of the Chief, we shall follow through, in our best clothes, the disappearance of the Comet in the Canteen at 20:00 hrs, tomorrow evening. The Chief will tell us whether it is going to rain. This is something which we cannot see happening every day.

To
Heads of Departments

Executive Director

The Heads of Departments send the following message to their Managers:

If it is raining in the Canteen tomorrow evening, which is something we cannot see happening every day, our Chief in his best clothes will disappear at 20:00 hrs.

To
All Managers

Head of Department

Finally, each Manager sends the following notice to their Executives:

Tomorrow evening, at 20:00 hrs. our Chief will disappear. It is a pity that we cannot see this happening every day.

Another type of organisational barrier is a 'departmental barrier'. This means that each department in an organisation functions in isolation and there is no co-ordination or communication between them.

- **Channel barriers** – In the previous topic, it was pointed out that communication can fail due to any of the different elements going wrong. Wrong choice of channel is one of the main barriers to communication. Using a wrong medium of advertising or conveying a message orally when a written letter would be more appropriate, are examples. The written channel

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is more appropriate when the communication is more formal or for keeping things on record, while emotional messages such as feelings about co-workers are better conveyed orally.

- **Linguistic and cultural barriers** – When the sender of the message uses a language that the receiver does not understand, the communication will not succeed. Either the sender may be using a different or foreign language, or the language used may be too highly technical for the receiver to understand.

Linguistic barriers may also occur in cross-cultural advertising and distort communication, when translating campaigns or slogans literally from one language to another. For example, Pepsi's slogan "Come Alive with Pepsi", when translated into Chinese, read "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave!". Many accidents have happened in air because the pilot, who is of foreign origin, has not followed properly the directions given by the Air Traffic Controller who speaks Indianised English.

Cultural differences refer to differences in values and perceptions, which may affect the interpretation of the message by the receiver. For example, a joke about women may be taken in the wrong sense if the receiver belongs to a culture in which women are highly respected.

- **Semantic barriers** – The word 'semantics' refers to the meaning of words and how they are used. For example, different words may have different meanings in different cultures. Failure to consider this could lead to serious blunders.

Example – Saying 'The new product launch went like a bomb' in British English would mean that the new product launch was a success.

On the other hand, saying 'The product launch bombed' in American English would mean that the new product was a disaster.

- **Non-verbal barriers** – This refers to the non-verbal communication that goes with a particular message. Non-verbal communication includes tone of voice, body language such as gestures and facial expressions, etc. If the tone of voice and body language are negative, the communication will fail, however positive is the spoken and written message.

For example, if you happen to meet a long lost friend and say, "I am delighted to meet you", but in a sad tone of voice, the exact opposite message will be conveyed!

Therefore, it is important to avoid giving conflicting signals, through the use of non-verbal communication.

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1.1 Overcoming the Barriers to Communication

Certain steps can be taken, both at the organisational level, as well as at the individual level, to effectively deal with the barriers to communication trying to minimise them, if not eliminate them.

Organisational action: Employees of an organisation accomplish workplace communication through several communication channels. One of the commonly cited problems in organisations is the poor workplace communication. Hence, organisations need to take few steps to ensure effective communication. Some of the steps which an organisation can take to overcome the barriers to effective communication are as follows:

- **Encourage feedback** – Organisations should try to improve the communication system by getting feedback for the messages already sent. Feedback can tell the managers whether the message has reached the receiver in the intended way or not.
- **Create a climate of openness** – A climate of trust and openness can go a long way in removing organisational barriers to communication. All subordinates or junior employees should be allowed to air their opinions and differences without fear of being penalised.
- **Use multiple channels of communication** – Organisations should encourage the use of multiple channels of communication, to make sure that messages reach the intended receivers without fail. This means using a combination of both oral and written channels, as well as formal (official) and informal (unofficial) channels of communication. The types of channels will be discussed in detail later, in segment 2.

Individual action: An individual can take certain actions to overcome the communication barriers. These actions will help to improve interpersonal relationships with others both in one's personal and business life. Some of the actions that an individual can take are:

- **Active listening** – This means listening to the meaning of the speaker's words, rather than listening without hearing, or 'passive listening'. Passive listening is a barrier to communication, whereas real communication takes place when we listen actively, with understanding. Listening is a skill which can be developed through proper training.
- **Careful wording of messages** – Messages should be worded clearly and without ambiguity, to make sure that the message that is received is the same as the message that is sent.

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- **Selection of appropriate channels** – Individuals should be competent enough to choose the right communication channel, depending on the situation. Channels of communication and the criteria for selection of channels will be discussed in detail in segment 2
- **Avoidance of technical language** – The language used in communication must be as clear as possible. Usage of unnecessary technical terms can lead to misunderstandings. Hence, an individual has to use technical words only when necessary.
- **Right feedback** – Feedback is an important communication skill. The correct feedback can elicit the correct action. The feedback given must be a proper combination of criticism and information sharing.

2. Summary

Here is a quick recap of what we have learnt so far:

- ‘Noise’ refers to all the factors that disrupt communication and can be classified under the following types:
 - Physical noise
 - Physiological noise
 - Psychological noise
- The barriers to communication may be classified as:
 - Environmental barriers
 - Individual barriers
 - Organisational barriers
 - Channel barriers
 - Linguistic and cultural barriers
 - Semantic barriers and
 - Non-verbal barriers
- There are a number of barriers or obstacles to smooth communication. These may be categorised as:
 - External or physical barriers
 - Individual barriers
 - Organisational barriers

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- Linguistic or cultural barriers
- Semantic barriers
- Channel barriers and
- Non-verbal barriers
- Some of the steps which an organisation can take to overcome the barriers to effective communication are :
 - Encourage feedback
 - Create a climate of openness and
 - Use multiple channels of communication
- Some of the actions that an individual can take to overcome the barriers to effective communication are
 - Active listening
 - Careful wording of messages
 - Selection of appropriate channels
 - Avoidance of technical language and
 - Right feedback

3. Glossary

Semantics	The study of meanings, changes in meanings, and the principles that govern the relationship between sentences or words and their meanings
Linguistics	The scientific study of the structure and semantics of a language