

Chapter 6

BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

Communication is not always successful. Several things can prevent the message from reaching the intended recipient or from having the desired effect on the recipient.

There may be some fault in the communication system which may prevent the message from reaching. Some of these defects are in the mechanical devices used for transmitting, that is, the medium. Some are in the tools we use for communicating, that is, language or other symbols used for encoding. Some are in the nature of the persons who are engaged in communication, that is, the sender and the recipient.

Barriers can be divided into three broad groups: Physical and External barriers, Semantic and Language barriers, and Socio-Psychological barriers.

PHYSICAL, EXTERNAL OR MECHANICAL BARRIERS

These are obstacles that prevent a message from reaching the intended recipient. Some cannot be controlled because they are in the environment; some can be controlled by the management.

Defects in the medium

Defects in the devices used for transmitting communication are external and usually not within the control of the parties engaged in communication. The telephone, the postal system, the courier service, or even electronic media may fail or break down.

A partial failure of the mechanical equipment is more dangerous than a complete failure, because a partial failure carries an incomplete or distorted message, which might cause a wrong action to be taken.

The only way to overcome this barrier is to postpone the communication or use an alternative medium.

Noise

Noise is any disturbance which occurs in the transmission process. In face-to-face communication without a microphone, the air may be disturbed by noise in the environment such as traffic, factory work, or people talking. Organizations which can afford sound-proof rooms can overcome this barrier. In a factory, oral communication is very difficult because of the noise of the machines.

Defects in the Organization's Communication System

Within the organization, the movement of papers and of information may be held up by the system itself. Oral messages and information which have to pass through too many levels of authority are often delayed. They are also likely to be distorted, because, at each level, they are edited and interpreted before being passed on. As a result, some persons in the organization may not get some information which they need for their work. This is known as a communication gap.

Many gaps are created in upward communication because subordinates do not send all information upward; they tend to send up only such information as will show them in a favourable light, and hide such information as may not be favourable to themselves. The system of routine reports and the system of sending copies of documents for information, is meant to ensure that information is conveyed to the concerned persons, but some information may still not reach some persons.

In downward communication, the loss of information is said to be so great that many employees at the lowest level receive only 20 per cent of what they should get. Too much dependence on written communication is one of the reasons for this. Circulars, bulletins, notices and even letters are not read carefully. Many employees, are unable to read and understand long messages. Even better educated employees at higher levels do not always give proper attention to all written communication. Oral communication has to be used to supplement written communication when the message is important.

The system of internal communication has to be checked constantly to make sure that there are no undue delays in conveying information.

SEMANTIC AND LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Language is our most important and powerful tool of communication; and yet it is a tricky tool which needs skill in handling. First of all, words have multiple meanings. Just look into a good dictionary and see how many meanings you can find for some commonly used words like "charge", "spring", "check", "suit", "ring". Words like "minute" and "wind" are pronounced in two different ways to mean two entirely different things. Some words like "present", "transfer", "record" are used as verb and as noun with a difference in stress in speaking, but no difference in spelling. Similar sounding words like "access" and "excess", "flour" and "flower", "cite", "site" and "sight" can cause misunderstanding in speech.

Besides, adjectives and adverbs like "far", "fast", "few", "early", "easy", convey different meanings to different persons depending on their daily activities and way of life. The meaning of descriptive adjectives like "beautiful" and "ugly" depends entirely on personal taste.

Even a concrete noun like "table" may suggest a writing table or a dining table or a statistical table to different persons; "chair" could be something to sit on, or a position to occupy. How many ideas does the word "home" convey? Emotional and cultural attitudes towards different things can evoke different responses in people; for example, "dog" will evoke responses according to a

person's past experience with the animal as well as cultural attitudes towards the animal.

Phrases can be more tricky; "a red and a blue carpet" signifies two carpets: one red and one blue. "A red and blue carpet" is one carpet in two colours.

Sentences can convey entirely different meanings depending on how they are spoken. Consider the sentence, "What can I do for you?" It means something different with every shift of emphasis from one word to another. In oral communication, the speaker can signify the meaning by emphasizing particular words; but in written communication, the reader is in control and may read with different emphasis.

More importantly, semantic barriers arise because words mean different things to different persons. It is said, "meaning is in people, not in words." Age, education, cultural background and many other factors influence the meaning we give to words.

Technical terms can be a barrier to communication. Such terms are limited to the group of persons who work together, or work in the same kind of occupation; they need to use technical terms in their work. Often, these words have other meanings in ordinary language, and are differently understood by people who do not belong to that occupational group. Consider the new meanings given to ordinary words by computer technology; to people who are not familiar with computers, "mouse" is only an animal.

Technical terms must be avoided or explained while communicating with persons from a different occupation.

SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS

All persons are not skilled communicators. Skill in communicating has to be cultivated. Most people have problems which come in the way of good communication. In order to be a skilful communicator you have to watch yourself constantly and make an effort to overcome your deficiencies or problems in communicating. It is useful to understand how barriers develop in persons, and what problems prevent communication from being successful.

People have personal feelings, desires, fears and hopes, likes and dislikes, attitudes, views and opinions. Some of these are formed by family background and social environment; some are formed by the individual's own intelligence, inherited qualities, education, and personal experiences. They form a sort of emotional filter around the mind, and influence the way we respond to messages that we receive and to new experiences. Factors like the time, the place and the circumstances of a particular communication also influence our understanding and response.

Problems of understanding, interpretation and response to communication arise partly from our socially-learnt attributes and partly from our personal attributes. These are called socio-psychological barriers. To some extent, these barriers may be overcome by an effort of the will. Persons in responsible positions need to overcome their barriers in order to be able to manage their work.

In order to overcome these barriers, you must know how we deal with a received message. We receive a message at three levels:

(i) **Noticing** is at the physical level. We notice the message with our senses; when we become aware that a message is addressed to us, we focus attention on it. It is quite possible that our eyes or ears miss it on account of other competing messages which claim our attention. Sometimes we may not notice a message addressed to us.

(ii) **Understanding** is at the level of intelligence. We must be able to understand the language or any other symbols used in the message. Also, the ideas and concepts in the message must be within our understanding and knowledge.

(iii) **Acceptance** is at the emotional level. There is usually an emotional response of pleasure, dislike or indifference to every message that we receive. If the message arouses an unpleasant feeling, we may reject it, resent it or forget it. Emotional blocks may even make us fail to understand the message correctly.

Most of the socio-psychological barriers discussed below operate at the emotional level.

Self-centred Attitudes

We tend to see and hear everything in the light of our own interests and needs and desires. We pay attention to messages which are useful to us, and often do not pay enough attention to those messages which do not interest us. Self-interest may prevent us from seeing the point of view of others. If we look at everything from the point of view of our own interests and desires, we miss some useful information and develop narrow ideas.

A person who is highly self-centred also fails to build up good relationships with other people. In order to win the goodwill of others with whom we work, we must be able to understand how other people feel and think.

Group Identification

Our values and opinions are influenced, in some matters, by the group to which we belong. All persons have a sense of belonging to a group, like family, the larger family of relatives, people of our locality or city, our religion or language group, age group, nationality, economic group and so on. Many of our ideas, attitudes and values are picked up from the group.

We tend to reject an idea which goes against the interests of the group. Sometimes it is difficult for parents and children to agree because of the different age group ideas; there are disagreements between women and men because of different gender ideas; employees and the management cannot come to an agreement because the interests are different. It is difficult for persons of one group to understand how persons of another group think and feel. This becomes a barrier to communication.

With emphasis on good relationships in business today, most people make efforts to see others' point of view; members of organizations are given training to make them sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of others.

Self-Image

We have a certain idea of our self; some persons even take care to project an image of themselves. Self-image is our idea about what we are, what we look like and what impression we make. It is usually based on some truth and some exaggeration of our good points.

A self-image is built up over the years, and it is quite difficult to accept any idea which goes against it. This makes it particularly difficult for us to give and take feedback. Difficulties in appraisal interviews arise from the fact that the employee's self-image is liable to be hurt.

If you make a good self-assessment, it will be easier for you to endure the stress of an assessment by others. A systematic self-assessment gives you a balanced self-image.

Selective Perception

Sometimes, we fail to get the complete message which is sent to us. We see, read or hear selectively according to our own needs, interests and experience. We project our expectations into the communication as we interpret the message. Some of the aspects and information content of the message may not be perceived by us.

Defensiveness

If we feel threatened by a message, we become defensive and respond in such ways that reduce understanding. We may question the motives of others or become sarcastic or judgemental. Such defensive behaviour prevents understanding.

Filtering

Filtering is the process of reducing the details or aspects of a message. Each person who passes on a message reduces or colours a message according to his/her understanding of the situation.

In the role of sender, we tend to edit information so that it will appear favourable to ourself; some information is changed and lost in this way. Information which has to be sent up the levels of hierarchy has to be condensed and integrated so that the senior managers at the top are not overloaded with information. At each level, the information gets edited according to what the person thinks is important for the boss. The more the levels of hierarchy in an organization, the greater is the filtering and loss of information.

A common barrier to horizontal communication is organizational politics; one manager may withhold information from another since possession of information usually has benefits and advantages.

Status Block

A "boss" who is conscious of status finds it difficult to receive favourably, any suggestions from subordinates. People in senior positions often develop the feeling that they know everything about how to run the business. They do not agree that a junior may have some good ideas. Many good ideas are wasted only because they come from junior employees who are considered to be too young and inexperienced.

The ideas of workers are most likely to go unheard because of the social distance between them and the managers. A subordinate may be too nervous to speak to a very senior manager. Social distance sometimes makes workers too shy or frightened to speak to their senior bosses. Social and official status distance can raise a difficult barrier which both may be unable to overcome.

Suggestion schemes are meant to overcome this status block. Good managers personally try to overcome it by developing friendly contact with their subordinates or by maintaining an office which does not frighten them by its status symbols of expensive decor and furnishing, or by following an "open door" policy.

Resistance to Change

This is a serious psychological barrier. Some people strongly resist new ideas which are against their established opinions or traditions or social customs. They may avoid new ideas because they feel insecure or afraid of changes in methods or situations. People bound by traditions have their own emotions, attitudes, standards and convictions and do not accept anything that goes against their cherished ideas.

Closed Mind

Limited intellectual background, limited reading and narrow interests can cause a person's mind to be narrow. This limits the ability to take in new ideas. Persons with a closed mind do not take any suggestions for change. Young employees with bright ideas and fresh approach feel frustrated by the closed mind of the senior people in an organization.

Persons with a closed mind have limited understanding of human nature; this makes it difficult for them to receive communications with sympathy. This becomes a serious barrier to receiving grievances and appeals.

These barriers can be overcome to some extent by organizational procedures like grievance committees, counselling and suggestion schemes.

Poor Communication Skills

Lack of skill in writing and speaking prevents a person from framing a message properly. Oral communication can be handicapped by a number of problems; nervousness in facing an audience may affect a person's clarity in speaking. Even excitement about an achievement or a new idea may make a person's speech incoherent. Written communication can be handicapped by poor skills in using the language.

Writing and speaking skills can be developed by training and practice. To be successful you will need to master the art of speaking to big and small audiences and on the telephone. You must also be able to write or dictate a message clearly and quickly.

The other two communication skills, reading and listening, are really the more important skills. Unfortunately, these two skills do not receive enough attention in business training schools. Poor reading habits and faulty listening are both psychological short-comings, and need careful training to overcome. Training workshops are organized for these skills.

State of Health

Physical condition can affect your efficiency in all communication skills. If you have a pain or fever you are not inclined to engage in communication. But even when there is no pain or fever, if the state of health is poor, communicating ability is reduced because the mind is not sufficiently alert; there may be gaps in attention while reading or listening; there may be lack of energy to think clearly and to find the right words. Perception is low when the state of health is poor. Emotions, which play an important part in successful communication, are easily disturbed.

If you want to do well, your health must be at its best. Avoid attending to important communication tasks when your health is not good.

CROSS-CULTURAL BARRIERS

Even in the best of conditions, communication can be difficult. Cross cultural factors naturally increase the possible problems of communication. If for historical or political reasons, the relationships between two countries are not friendly, there can be even greater problems of communication.

Culture is a shared set of values and attributes of a group; it is the sum total of the ways of living built up by a group and transmitted from one generation to another. Culture is so much a part of an individual's manner of talking, behaving and thinking, that communication style and competence are influenced by it.

In a world that is becoming global in its business, skill in communicating with people of other cultures is vital to success. Many international business training firms give courses in cross-cultural communication to company executives. Knowledge of some of the features in which cultures differ, provides a good foundation for any training you might like to take later.

Some of the most significant differences between cultures are:

- National character/basic personality
- Language
- Values and norms of behaviour
- Social relationships
- Concepts of time
- Concepts of space
- Thinking processes
- Non-verbal communication
- Perception

Each nation has a character of its own. The Chinese are not like the Indians, nor the Pakistanis nor the Sri Lankans, although they are neighbouring countries. Neighbouring European nations like the French and the Germans and the Swiss are also different from one another.

The Language of any group directly reflects their culture. You only have to think of some of the sayings or proverbs or idiomatic expressions in an Indian language and in English to see that translation from one to the other is nearly impossible. Many words cannot be translated exactly. Even among

countries that speak the same language like the British and the Australians, a word may not have the same significance. It has been pointed out that Russians cannot understand the concepts of free market, regulation, efficiency as the British or the Canadians do.

Connotations of words differ in different cultures. When the Japanese say "yes" they mean "Yes, I'm listening." The Americans may take it to mean "Yes, I agree". Negotiations are made difficult because of this.

Values are our ideas of what is good and what is evil; they form the basis of our behaviour and actions. Notions of good and evil vary between cultures. Besides, norms, rules and manners of cultures differ. Behaviour expected from women in Eastern cultures is different from what is expected in Western cultures. Certain subjects which are not considered proper for talking about in polite society in one culture may be acceptable in another.

Social relationships depend on the groupings in that society. All societies have groups like families, classes, castes, and so on. The Indian caste system, though officially abolished, still plays a significant part in social behaviour. Significance of family relationships in India is reflected in the elaborate system of words which can describe the precise relationship of two persons indicating the descent three or even four generations back. In Western Languages, the all-covering word "cousin" describes a variety of relationships. Relationships between parents and children, between teachers and students, and the rules of behaviour that govern these relationships differ vastly between Eastern and Western cultures.

Concept of time is perhaps one of the most troublesome differences that cause barriers in cross-cultural communication, especially between Eastern and Western cultures. The Eastern concept of time is that it is circular, while the Western concept is that it is linear. Apart from this, time orientation varies; some cultures focus on the past, some on the present and some on the future. For some cultures, "time is money" and is more important than personal relationships; for others, time is subordinate to relationships.

As a result of perceiving time differently, work behaviour and social behaviour styles vary greatly. Ideas about punctuality and scheduling of activities depend on the concept of time. In India, and other Eastern countries, lack of punctuality and not functioning to schedule is almost normal; in Western countries arriving late for an appointment is one of the worst things you can do. The idea of keeping work time strictly separate from personal time is a Western concept and is not easy for Eastern cultures to understand and follow. Attitude to time is one of the major problems in cross-cultural communication between Indians and people of Western cultures.

Concept of space influences design and use of shapes and colour in design. Besides, it has an important effect on behaviour and the distance between speakers during conversation; in some cultures, speakers stand close enough to touch often, while in others they maintain distance to denote respect. People in South Asian countries like India and Sri Lanka, maintain less inter-personal distance.

Thought processes vary between cultures; some are strictly logical and rational while others may be holistic and emotional. The frame of reference, that is, the higher perspective from which we view a situation makes a difference to the way we see it.

Thinking process is affected by acceptance or rejection of superstition, belief in magic, miracles and so on; cultures where these beliefs are rejected are likely to view the world as logical, clear and law-based.

Non-verbal behaviour is another area of trouble in cross-cultural communication. Body language is a major factor that varies between cultures. Not only are gestures understood differently, but the amount of use of gesture varies. Indians use much more natural gesture than the British; the Japanese have many formal gestures for social interaction but less free body movements.

Appearance tends to be an unconscious basis for evaluation. We react unconsciously to the biological appearance (colour and texture of skin and hair, shape and colour of eyes, stature and body structure) as well as to the acquired appearance (style of dress and grooming) of persons we communicate with. Appearance of people of different cultures varies significantly; besides, there are multi-cultural nations like Canada which can present problems to Indians.

Ways of dressing and what is considered formal clothes is another problem area. The Indian saree which seems so formal in India, is not acceptable formal clothing in most American companies.

Paralanguage means aspects of the voice. Cross-cultural confusion arises from the way we use our voice. People in many countries are put off by loud Indian voices, and noisy Indian tourists. Some Western cultures speak in such low voices that we can hardly hear them, and may wonder if they intend to be secretive. Difference between cultures in speed of talking makes the faster talking people consider the slow talking cultures as slow and lax. Some cultures expect formality and formal tone at work and are embarrassed or put off by the informal tone of another culture. The amount of silence that is considered as right during a conversation can cause confusion. The Japanese believe, "Those who know do not speak—those who speak do not know"; this is quite contrary to Americans who are embarrassed by silence and hasten to fill it by speaking. Closely related are the rules of turn-taking in conversation; most Western cultures consider interrupting as very impolite; each speaker is allowed to complete speaking; in India interrupting others in a conversation is acceptable. Also, "breaking into" a conversation between others is acceptable here, but not in Western cultures.

Perception is influenced by culture. We perceive some things and ignore others; we particularly perceive what is contrary to our own culture and what makes us uncomfortable. What smells "good" or "bad" is perceived differently. Rain means something different for Indians from what it means for the British.

Differences of perception of the world can be amazing. Our world view and attitudes to life affect our meanings.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Constant organizational effort is needed to overcome the barriers which are unconsciously built up by different people in the organization. Persons in positions of authority, as well as subordinates, can be helped to overcome these barriers by training in effective communication. Periodical review and reorganization of communication networks is also needed to ensure that information reaches people in time.

The responsibility for overcoming barriers to personal communication and ensuring the success of every communication activity falls upon the senior and the better trained person. The higher your position, the greater is your need for effective communication. You have to cultivate all the communication skills including getting feedback and non-verbal communication.

The external barriers of defective channels and faulty organizational systems are the Management's responsibility within the organization. The channels must be kept in good working condition; the intercoms, notice-boards, information meetings must be kept up-to-date. Many companies which can afford it, maintain soundproof rooms for meetings and take steps to reduce the noise level in the office.

Semantic and language barriers can be overcome only by being careful with the use of language, and by using words which have clear meaning, by using short and simple sentences, and also by using visual aid whenever possible. Whenever possible, feedback must be got and given to ensure that there is common understanding of a message.

Personal barriers can be overcome only by making a conscious effort, and by training for better communication. Persons in responsible positions are expected to improve their communication skills and overcome their particular blocks. Many companies organize training sessions for their staff for better communication skills.

Barriers can develop unexpectedly since emotions play a large part in communication. It is not easy to overcome all barriers; everyone has to make efforts to be aware of them and take care to avoid them.

To reduce misunderstanding when communicating with people from different cultures, these rules may be useful:

Don't assume similarity until you are sure. We tend to think others are similar to us and are often surprised to find they are quite different in their thinking. It is safer to assume difference till you are sure of similarity.

Depend on description rather than evaluation or interpretation; persons from different cultures evaluate and interpret differently. Before communicating, try to feel yourself in the other's role, values and frame of reference.

EXERCISES

1. What is meant by barriers to communication?