

Professional Communication Skills

Case Study (Barriers to Communication)

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Barriers to Communication Case Study 5

One common complaint employees voice about supervisors is inconsistent messages – meaning one supervisor tells them one thing and another tells them something different. Imagine you are the supervisor/manager for each of the employees described below. As you read their case, consider how you might help communicate with the employee to remedy the conflict. Answer the critical thinking questions at the end of the case then compare your answers to the Notes to Supplement Answers section.

Barry is a 27-year old who is a food service manager at a casual dining restaurant. Barry is responsible for supervising and managing all employees in the back of the house. Employees working in the back of the house range in age from 16 years old to 55 years old. In addition, the employees come from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. For many, English is not their primary language. Barry is ServSafe® certified and tries his best to keep up with food safety issues in the kitchen but he admits it's not easy. Employees receive “on-the-job training” about food safety basics (for example, appropriate hygiene and handwashing, time/temperature, and cleaning and sanitizing). But with a high turnover of employees, training is often rushed and some new employees are put right into the job without training if it is a busy day.

Eventually, most employees get some kind of food safety training. The owners of the restaurant are supportive of Barry in his food safety efforts because they know if a food safety outbreak were ever linked to their restaurant; it would likely put them out of business. Still, the owners note there are additional costs for training and making sure food is handled safely. One day Barry comes to work and is rather upset even before he steps into the restaurant. Things haven't been going well at home and he was lucky to rummage through some of the dirty laundries and find a relatively clean outfit to wear for work. He admits he needs a haircut and a good hand scrubbing, especially after working on his car last evening. When he walks into the kitchen he notices several trays of uncooked meat sitting out in the kitchen area. It appears these have been sitting at room temperature for quite some time.




Barry is frustrated and doesn't know what to do. He feels like he is beating his head against a brick wall when it comes to getting employees to practice food safety. Barry has taken many efforts to get employees to be safe in how they handle food. He has huge signs posted all over the kitchen with these words: KEEP HOT FOOD HOT AND COLD FOOD COLD and WASH YOUR HANDS ALWAYS AND OFTEN. All employees are given a thermometer when they start so that they can temp food. Hand sinks, soap, and paper towels are available for employees so that they are encouraged to wash their hands frequently.

1. What are the communication challenges and barriers Barry faces?

Ans:

Communication challenges abound in any workplace. Barry has some common challenges in his operation.

- A. **Language barriers:** Not all employees speak English as their first language making verbal communication a challenge at times. If the speaker and receiver do not use the same language and words, there is no meaning to the communication. Not using the words that the other person understands makes the communication ineffective and prevents the message from being conveyed.
- B. **Generational (age) barriers:** Having employees in various age categories can pose a unique set of challenges. While the younger generation is used to texting and using shortened messaging, their vocabulary may not be consistent with that of older employees. Work values and attitudes may also affect communication between younger and older employees. One of the biggest problems with written communication is that it's hard to interpret tone. When you can't see who you're talking to, you have no idea if your jokes are on target or falling flat. When you read something, it's easy to misinterpret what the writer means. Is that sarcasm or something else? It's



hard to say. And, while you can help with tone through the use of emojis (the eye-rolling emoji can help indicate sarcasm or irony), not everyone interprets the same emoji the same way. The eye roll emoji can also indicate boredom, annoyance, or impatience, among others. Even punctuation can be subject to interpretation.

- C. **Cultural and ethnic barriers:** Cultural differences in food safety practices may be a challenge for Barry to overcome. Cultural diversity can make communication difficult, especially in the workplace, where a misunderstanding can cause costly problems. When people from different cultures work together, several factors can become barriers. We'll be taking a look at these factors first, and then dive into how to overcome them in a global team.
- D. **Non-verbal challenges:** Barry's body language (appearance) is telling others he does not care about personal appearance and cleanliness. When nonverbal communication is often incongruent with spoken words, others may not be sure of intentions and may find it difficult to have faith in what a person is saying. An individual may also nonverbally convey a particular emotion others find off-putting, such as a sense of judgment or aggression.
- E. **Emotional barriers:** Emotional barriers can interfere with effective communication. Barry comes into work after a rough start at home. These negative emotions are affecting how he communicates with the employees. An emotional barrier is a mental block that influences how you perceive others' actions and prevents you from clearly communicating your feelings. Emotional barriers can trigger an emotional response that's inappropriate or unproductive.




2. What solutions might Barry consider in addressing each of these challenges and barriers?

Ans:

Barry might consider the following solutions to the identified challenges and barriers:

- A. **Language barriers:** Several potential solutions might be addressed here including posting signs in employees' primary language. Putting signage with visuals, not just words. Barry might learn some simple words in the employees' primary language to help show interest in the employees.
- B. **Generational (age) barriers:** Currently there are 4 generations in the workforce and each potentially has a different preferred method of communication. While the younger generation might prefer to receive text messages as their preferred way of communication, older employees may not find this method of communication acceptable. Consider your employee's preferences and be willing to communicate a message in a few different ways.
- C. **Cultural and ethnic barriers:** Barry may need to identify cultural beliefs and work to understand the ethnic barriers related to food safety. For instance, two employees come from the same country and they have made comments that controlling temperature in their country is not a priority; food can be at room temperature for long periods and nothing ever happens.
- D. **Non-verbal challenges:** Barry's appearance is a nonverbal cue to employees. Barry's appearance is important as he is a role model to the employees. His actions and behaviors should be consistent with what he is expecting from them. For example, because he is expecting the employees to follow proper



handwashing procedures, he should also use proper handwashing procedures.

- E. **Emotional barriers:** Emotional barriers can interfere with effective communication. It will be important for Barry to get his emotions “in check” before starting work. Having self-awareness and potentially seeking outside assistance (ie. Employee Assistance Programs) may be possible solutions here.

