

Chapter 6

Barriers to Communication

Barriers to Communication

Introduction:

People interact with each other for various reasons. In some cases they are successful in achieving what they intended to and in other cases not so. What makes some people better than others in getting results from their interaction is their art of communication. In this session, communication concept & barriers to be overcome for better communication will be discussed.

Learning objectives:

By the end of this session, participant will be able to:

- Define Communication
- List various methods of communication at workplace
- Explain modes of communication
- Understand barriers to communication
- Understand ways to Facilitate better communication

What is communication?

Communication is the method by which people share their ideas, information, opinions and feelings. People sharing ideas, information, opinions and feelings may contribute to the operations of teams and the work of individuals. Communication is a two-way activity between two or more people. The common model of communication is:

Sender → Message → Encoding → Channel → Decoding → Message → Receiver
 ←-----Feedback-----|

Methods of Communication:

In an organisation there are various methods of communication. The following is a list of some methods of communication:

- person to person - face to face, reading a letter, making a phone call
- in a small group - planning, problem solving, decision making, written reports, memos, notice boards
- in a meeting - presenting, bargaining, negotiating agreements
- using mass media - speaking in public, on radio or television, writing for print media such as newspapers and journals, books, advertising

- others - training, teaching, entertaining.

Modes of Communication:

- Verbal
- Nonverbal
- Written

Verbal Communication:

Verbal communication is when a person puts across a message by speaking. The message can be sent to an individual, a team or a group. The message can be sent in person, via an intercom, over the phone, email etc. The person sending the message should express the message clearly so that the receiver is able to understand and act, if required, on the message. The receiver of the message should be able to understand what was said. Many times the the message may not be received as the sender intended, due to a range of factors including lack of attention or interest.

Non-verbal Communication:

There are numerous ideas, thoughts and feelings that are communicated without words. Only one third of a message is sent in a person-to-person exchange in words alone. People have the ability to read non-verbal cues. These cues are learnt from the environment and through culture and can therefore be misinterpreted.

The following are examples of non-verbal communication;

- yawn
- tears
- frown
- crossing arms
- averting eyes

Non-verbal communication is divided into six types. They are:

- body language
- physical characteristics and appearance
- voice
- space
- environment
- time

Silence can be a type of non-verbal communication

Writing:

Written communication provides a record for the future. Written communication can be studied, reflected on and absorbed at the receiver's own pace. Written communication is permanent and makes a lasting impression. The written word can sometimes have more authority. Words can be written, rewritten, edited until the communication is seen as clear and accurate and is ready to be sent to the receiver. Written communication includes letters, memos, email, minutes of meetings, reports, instructions, diagrams, maps, other pictorial aids etc.

Written communication can overcome distance and can be cheaper than face-to-face meetings. It can be useful when information has to be sent to large numbers of people and can reinforce verbal communication.

Communication barriers:

Personnel in a workplace communicate with peers, managers, supervisors, members of the public, suppliers and others. Barriers to communication can cause problems and misunderstanding with effective communication. These barriers suggest opportunities for improving communication. Some barriers are explained below:

Muddled messages - Effective communication starts with a clear message. Contrast these two messages: "Please be here about 7:00 tomorrow morning." "Please be here at 7:00 tomorrow morning." The one word difference makes the first message muddled and the second message clear. Muddled messages are a barrier to communication because the sender leaves the receiver unclear about the intent of the sender. Muddled messages have many causes. The sender may be confused in his or her thinking. The message may be little more than a vague idea. The problem may be semantics, e.g., note this muddled newspaper ad: "Dog for sale. Will eat anything. Especially likes children. Call 1800-3591-DOG for more information." Feedback from the receiver is the best way for a sender to be sure that the message is clear rather than muddled. Clarifying muddled messages is the responsibility of the sender. The sender hoping the receiver will figure out the message does little to remove this barrier to communication.

Stereotyping:

Stereotyping causes us to typify a person, a group, an event or a thing on oversimplified conceptions, beliefs, or opinions. Thus, basketball players can be stereotyped as tall, Petrol vehicle better than Diesel, Pandits as vegetarians, villagers as illiterate. Stereotyping can substitute for thinking, analysis and open mindedness to a new situation. Stereotyping is a barrier to communication when it

causes people to act as if they already know the message that is coming from the sender or worse, as if no message is necessary because "everybody already knows." Both senders and listeners should continuously look for and address thinking, conclusions and actions based on stereotypes.

Wrong channel:

"Good morning." An oral channel for this message is highly appropriate. Writing "GOOD MORNING!" on a chalkboard in the classroom is less effective than a warm oral greeting. On the other hand, a detailed request to a contractor for supply of material should be in writing, i.e., non-oral. These simple examples illustrate how the wrong channel can be a barrier to communication. Variation of channels helps the receiver understand the nature and importance of a message. A written disciplinary warning for late coming emphasizes to the employee that the problem is serious. A birthday card to an employee's child is more sincere than a request to the employee to say "Happy Birthday" to the child.

Simple rules for selection of a channel cause more problems than they solve. In choice of a channel, the sender needs to be sensitive to such things as the complexity of the message (good morning versus a supply contract); knowledge, skills and abilities of the receiver; and immediacy of action to be taken from the message.

Language

Words are not reality. Words as the sender understands them are combined with the perceptions of those words by the receiver. Language represents only part of the whole. We fill in the rest with perceptions.

- Coded words: Trying to understand a foreign language easily demonstrates words not being reality. Being "foreign" is not limited to the language of another country. A brassy day may say much about temperature and little about color. Each new employee needs to be taught the language of the company. Until the company's language is learned, it can be as much a barrier to communication as a foreign language. For example in BSNL, various terms such as CDNP, Dead, NDT, etc.
- Using "You" or "We" statements instead of "I" statements. "I" statements show ownership of what is being said. "You" statements are often a form of criticism. "We" statements often implies everyone within listening distance agrees with the statement which is not true. Its like you speaking for another person without their permission.

- Absolute Statements. These use such words as Never, always, forever, etc. and are often make a statement untrue. Use a less absolute word.

Lack of feedback:

Feedback is the mirror of communication. Feedback mirrors what the sender has sent. Feedback is the receiver sending back to the sender the message as perceived. Without feedback, communication is one-way.

Feedback happens in a variety of ways. Asking a person to repeat what has been said, e.g., repeat instructions, is a very direct way of getting feedback. Feedback may be as subtle as a stare, a puzzled look, a nod, or failure to ask any questions after complicated instructions have been given. Both sender and receiver can play an active role in using feedback to make communication truly two-way.

Feedback should be helpful rather than hurtful. Prompt feedback is more effective than feedback saved up until the "right" moment. Feedback should deal in specifics rather than generalities. Approach feedback as a problem in perception rather than a problem of discovering the facts.

Poor listening skills:

Listening is difficult. A typical speaker says about 125 words per minute. The typical listener can receive 400-600 words per minute. Thus, about 75 percent of listening time is free time. The free time often sidetracks the listener. The solution is to be an active rather than passive listener. One important listening skill is to be prepared to listen. Tune out thoughts about other people and other problems. Search for meaning in what the person is saying. A mental "Shut up" is a useful listening guideline. Withhold evaluation and judgment until the other person has finished with the message. A listener's premature frown, shaking of the head, or bored look can easily convince the other person there is no reason to elaborate or try again to communicate his or her excellent idea. Providing feedback is the most important active listening skill. Ask questions. Nod in agreement. Look the person straight in the eye. Lean forward. Be an animated listener. Focus on what the other person is saying. Repeat key points.

Active listening is particularly important in dealing with an angry person. Encouraging the person to speak, i.e., to vent feelings, is essential to establishing communication with an angry person. Repeat what the person has said. Ask questions to encourage the person to say again what he or she seemed most anxious to say in the first place. An angry person will not start listening until they have "cooled" down. Telling an angry person to "cool" down often has the opposite effect. Getting angry with an angry person only assures that there are now two people not listening to what the other is saying.

- Automatic Talking: Listening just long enough to find a word that you know something about. Then shut off the rest of what is being said, particularly the emotional content. Then start talking about the word you know something about. This blocks real communications by not hearing the total content. This is the most used form of blocking true communication
- SELECTIVE LISTENING: This is when a person hears another but selects to not hear what is being said by choice or desire to hear some other message. This can take several forms and result in acting out in destructive ways. An example is to become passive aggressive by pretending to hear and agree to what was said when actually your intent is to NOT act on the message, but make the other person think you will. Another form is to act on what you wanted to hear instead of what was said. Continued selective listening is one of the best ways to destroy a relationship.
- Daydreaming. Letting your attention drift away. There are many causes of this and you can stop it by getting into the conversation and saying you are having a hard time staying with what is being said, without blaming. You may find out others are having the same difficulty and will do the same.
- Being the Reactor. On occasion, a person will attempt to get you to speak by trying to "*hook*" you to react. Swearing is a way of hooking some people. A good listener will continue to just listen and not react. This will often cause the person to stop trying to hook you if you keep it up long enough.

Interruptions:

The interruptions may be due to something more pressing, rudeness, lack of privacy for discussion, a drop-in visitor, an emergency, or even the curiosity of someone else wanting to know what two other people are saying. Regardless of the cause, interruptions are a barrier to communication. In the extreme, there is a reluctance of employees and family members even to attempt discussion with a manager because of the near certainty that the conversation will be interrupted. Less extreme but serious is the problem of incomplete instructions because someone came by with a pressing question.

Physical distractions:

Physical distractions are the physical things that get in the way of communication. Examples of such things include the telephone, a pick-up truck door, a desk, an uncomfortable meeting place, and noise.

These physical distractions are common in offices. If the phone rings, the tendency is to answer it even if the caller is interrupting a very important meeting

conversation. A supervisor may give instructions from the driver's seat of a pick-up truck. Talking through an open window and down to an employee makes the truck door a barrier. A person sitting behind a desk, especially if sitting in a large chair, talking across the desk is talking from behind a physical barrier. Another example is a meeting room with uncomfortable chairs that soon cause people to want to stand even if it means cutting short the discussion.

EXPECTATIONS:

Are your expectations of others or organizations a barrier? Do others know your expectations or do you just think they know them? Can you change your expectations or let go of them to be part of a group or a relationship? How would that feel? Did this in any way feel like giving up your "self" to be what the others wants you to be? This is probably the number one barrier to communications. Expectations are often not expressed to others and it is as if the other is expected to have a crystal ball and know what you expect.

RISKING:

What is a risk for you? How much do you risk in a communications setting? What keeps you from risking? Is it fear? If so, fear of what? Is it control? Control of what? Yourself or others or the group? Do you wish to risk more? What will it take to risk more? More trust? This is probably the top barriers in communicating authentically. Risk in communication often has this silent question: *"If I risk myself and this is all I've got, what will happen if I am rejected?"* Building communications with others authentically takes a degree of risk.

AVOIDANCE:

What behavior do you use to avoid looking at yourself? Think about this hard. What was behind the avoidance? Fear of rejection? Fear of loss of control? Have you been part of an avoidance "project" to shift the subject away from yourself to enter a comfort zone? Avoidance frequently is present when a person feels unsafe or is unsure if its safe. Many business meetings start with considerable avoidance and only in the last minutes does the participants get to the real subject, and then often try a quick fix. Avoidance can become a habit. Vulnerability is a good way to build relationships with others, but it is often scary and avoided. It takes risk to share your self.

FIXING:

Has anyone try to fix you? The group? How did that feel? Did you try to fix, heal or convert anyone or the group? Can you fix anyone other than yourself? How aware are you that this is often done, with good intentions and well-meaning but usually not wanted and unaccepted 90+% of the time? What is your level of acceptance of people just as they are? Fixing is often trying to get the other to believe as you do or to do as you have done in a similar situation or to be more like you so you will feel more comfortable.

SCAPEGOATING:

Have you felt scapegoated? What did it feel like? Have you been part of a scapegoating effort on another person? Scapegoating is often form of nasty avoidance or blaming or excluding. It may be an attempt to keep focus off of the person doing the scapegoating! It is seen in most family situations and in the workplace and is usually destructive.

PROBING:

Do you probe others for information? Have others probed you ? How did that feel? Did it create a barrier for you? If you were probed and did not like it, what kept you from confronting the prober? If you were the prober, why did you probe? Did it have anything to do with keeping the focus off of you? Probing can be avoidance of task or scapegoating if carried too far.

CONTROL:

Did anyone try to control you or what you said? How did it feel? Were you aware at any time that you were trying to control an outcome? If you tried to control, what was the reason? Was it to control what might happen to you? Did you notice others trying control? Controlling often takes the form of manipulation. Manipulation does not feel good when it is discovered. Most of us believe we have far more control than we actually do. Letting go of control and risking more may result in more love coming into your life.

BLAMING:

Have anyone blame you for what was or was not happening? How did that feel? Do you blame others or own what is your responsibility? What was your motive for the blaming? Did it have to do with trying to make some other person responsible for your behavior? Did you experience blaming in your family of origin? Blaming can become an almost unconscious habit.

CONFLICT AVOIDANCE (CHAOS) : Do you run from conflict or avoid it in some way instead of trying to go through it? Do you leave a conversation when it gets too hot for you? (either actual or emotionally) How do you react to change? Another word for conflict/chaos can be change. People find many ways to avoid talking about change as it usually feels uncomfortable because of the unknown. Chaos can also mean conflict and most people will do anything to avoid it. Chaos is one of the most certain things in life and it is well to learn how to embrace it.

EXCLUSION:

Did you feel excluded at any time? Did you exclude yourself? Did some person say anything that made you feel excluded? Was your feeling of exclusion accurate? Is this something that often happens to you? Did you exclude any person either by avoiding them, or emotionally tuning them out, or by making a judgmental statement? Did you later change the exclusion to inclusion? Think of how people are often excluded and why. It is often done as an unconscious act that may have been learned in the family or work place.

Boundary or barrier:

A boundary is often created for protection and should only be changed with considerable thought. A boundary "rule" is one you have originated that defines what is good or bad for you. A boundary may be a barrier to communication depending on what it is. Boundaries are accumulated during life for protection and become a learned method of existing. Boundaries need to be changed slowly and may be replaced with another boundary that offers more freedom until it becomes safe to "take the next step". Some people have few or almost no boundaries and this often gets them into trouble. An example of this is a person that regularly offers far more information than is asked for by people they talk to. This becomes a turnoff to others and may result in other avoiding you.

Cultural barriers:

When we join a group and wish to remain in it, sooner or later we need to adopt the behaviour patterns of the group. These are the behaviours that the group accept as signs of belonging. The group rewards such behaviour through acts of recognition, approval and inclusion. In groups which are happy to accept you, and where you are happy to conform, there is a mutuality of interest and a high level of win-win contact. Where, however, there are barriers to membership of a group, a high level of game-playing replaces good communication.

Gender barriers:

There are distinct differences between the speech patterns in a man and those in a woman. A woman speaks between 22,000 and 25,000 words a day whereas a man speaks between 7,000 and 10,000. In childhood, girls speak earlier than boys and at the age of three, have a vocabulary twice that of boys. The reason for this lies in the wiring of a man's and woman's brains. When a man talks, his speech is located in the left side of the brain but in no specific area. When a woman talks, the speech is located in both hemispheres and in two specific locations. This means that a man talks in a linear, logical and compartmentalised way, features of left-brain thinking; whereas a woman talks more freely mixing logic and emotion, features of both sides of the brain. It also explains why women talk for much longer than men each day.

Lack of Subject Knowledge:

If a person who sends a message lacks subject knowledge then he may not be able to convey his message clearly. The receiver could misunderstand his message, and this could lead to a barrier to effective communication.

Stress:

One of the major communication barriers faced by employees in most of the organization is stress. When a person is under immense stress, he may find it difficult to understand the message, leading to communication distortion. At the time of stress, our psychological frame of mind depends on our beliefs, experiences, goals and values. Thus, we fail to realize the essence of communication.

Facilitating Communication

In addition to removal of specific barriers to communication, the following general guidelines may also facilitate communication.

- Have a positive attitude about communication. Defensiveness interferes with communication.
- Work at improving communication skills. It takes knowledge and work. The communication model and discussion of barriers to communication provide the necessary knowledge. This increased awareness of the potential for improving communication is the first step to better communication.
- Include communication as a skill to be evaluated along with all the other skills in each person's job description. Help other people improve their communication skills by helping them understand their communication problems.

- Make communication goal oriented. Relational goals come first and pave the way for other goals. When the sender and receiver have a good relationship, they are much more likely to accomplish their communication goals.
- Approach communication as a creative process rather than simply part of the chore of working with people. Experiment with communication alternatives. What works with one person may not work well with another person. Vary channels, listening techniques, and feedback techniques.
- Accept the reality of miscommunication. The best communicators fail to have perfect communication. They accept miscommunication and work to minimize its negative impacts.

Summary

Communication is at the heart of many interpersonal problems faced by employees. Understanding the communication process and then working at improvement provide managers a recipe for becoming more effective communicators. Knowing the common barriers to communication is the first step to minimizing their impact. Managers can reflect on how they are doing and make use of the ideas presented in this paper. When taking stock of how well you are doing as a manager, first ask yourself and others how well you are doing as a communicator.

Questions:

1. What is communications?
2. List various methods of communication at workplace.
3. Explain modes of communication.
4. What are various barriers to communication/
5. How communication can be effective explain?
6. What is the difference between verbal and non-verbal communication?
7. Give six examples of non-verbal communication.
8. What is muddled message?
9. Write a short note on boundary or barriers in communication.
10. What do you mean by facilitating communication?