

Barriers to Effective Communication

Recognising the most common communication barriers and understanding how they impact on effective communication is very important. Removing barriers is one of the easiest ways to improve communication. This article briefly studies the major obstacles to communication. Each barrier will then be examined in turn in further articles, with tips on overcoming each one.

Some of the principal barriers to communication are:

- noise (interruptions, physical distractions)
- physical (geographical considerations, time and space)
- mental attitude (perceptions, stereotyping, prejudice, personal beliefs, status, relationship between communicators, culture, emotionality)
- poor feedback
- poor listening skills
- selection of inappropriate medium or language used
- body language (non-verbal communication)

Noise

Noise is any interference that occurs between the communicators, i.e. the sender of the message, and the receiver. Noise appears in many forms – it can be distractions due to pictures on the wall, or objects in the room. In written forms of communication it can be the inclusion of irrelevant material, or an unsystematic approach to the topic. Other forms of noise can include: interruptions by other people, a ringing telephone, or external noise such as traffic outside a building, or people having a conversation close by.

Physical

Physical distractions are the physical things that can get in the way of the communication process. A basic physical distraction can be the environment – the room may be too hot or too cold, or chairs can be uncomfortable. A person sitting behind a desk or standing behind a lectern automatically creates a physical barrier between sender and receiver. Time and space also serve as barriers to effective communication. When departments of an organisation are geographically separate, quick, face-to-face communication becomes much more difficult. In global organisations, the time difference between colleagues in other continents can be a key communication barrier.

Mental attitude

The attitude of both the sender and the receiver can act as an obstacle in the communication process. Factors here include: respect, culture, and assumptions based on personal bias or stereotyping. Lack of empathy between the communicators can create a barrier as this entails putting aside preconceptions and prejudices. The relationship between the sender and the receiver is also important – if the relationship is good, communication automatically has a better chance for success. Another key factor here is emotionality, e.g. if the speaker or the listener feels very strongly about a certain subject this will influence the communication process.

Poor feedback

Feedback is the receiver sending back the message to the sender as they have perceived it. It is reaction and without this, it is impossible for the sender to know if the receiver has accepted and understood the message. It can occur in a number of ways: people can be asked to repeat what they have said, or non-verbal communication such as a frown or a nod can provide valuable feedback to the sender. Feedback is especially important to help clarify muddled messages.

Poor listening skills

Listening skills can have a major impact on the effectiveness of communication. A typical speaker will say about 125 words per minute, while a listener can receive 400-600 words per minute. Therefore, about 75% of listening time is free time, which can distract the listener. Barriers to communication here include not paying attention or daydreaming, so some or all of the message gets lost in the communication process.

Selection of inappropriate medium or language

Selecting the correct channel for communication is crucial, as using the wrong channel can hinder the communication process. In any situation, one medium may work better than another, although sometimes a combination of media will be the most useful. Simple messages can usually be transmitted orally, while more complex messages should be transmitted orally and in writing.

The language chosen is also vital to effective communication. Using exclusionary language such as jargon, slang and abbreviations can be a major obstacle in the communication process. Similarly, the level of language used must be chosen carefully. The level of education and knowledge of the intended audience must be considered, as must their social and cultural background.

Non-verbal communication

About 55% of the meaning of a message is communicated through non-verbal interaction. This includes posture, gestures, facial expression, tone and pitch of voice, style of dress, eye gaze and proximity (personal space). However, non-verbal cues can be ambiguous and their meaning can vary with respect to culture, context and intention. Random gestures can be interpreted to have some significance when none was intended. Style of dress can also have a huge influence on non-verbal communication as this can affect people's perceptions and stereotypes.

The different types of barriers to effective communication can all reinforce each other, leading to vicious cycles. By anticipating potential barriers and attempting to avoid them wherever possible, the impact of communication can become greatly increased.

Related Items

Related Resources

- [Overcoming Barriers to Effective Communication: Noise and Physical Barriers](#)
- [Overcoming Barriers to Effective Communication: Mental Attitude](#)