

Chapter IV

Barriers to communication

The word barrier means an obstacle, a hindrance or simply a problem that comes in a way of transmission of a message and blocks the process, either completely or partially.

Different types of barriers are as follows:

1. Physical or environmental barriers:

- a. Noise - The noise created by external factors like traffic, playing of loud music, trains and airplanes, or by crowds of people, affects our communication.
- b. Time & distance - Time becomes a physical barrier when people have to communicate across different time zones in different countries. The physical distance between people who need to communicate can also cause problems because it does not allow oral or face-to-face communication.
- c. Defects in communication system – Mechanical problems and defects in instruments of communication also create physical barriers, as in a faulty fax machine or typewriter. Similarly, a computer that hangs, or a dead telephone line can lead to non-transmission of messages. eg. No range in mobile, technical problem in mike or speakers.
- d. Wrong selection of medium – The sender selects the medium which is not familiar to the receiver.
- e. Physiological defects like stammering, hearing defects, mumbling while speaking etc.

2. Language or Semantic barriers:

Language is the main medium of communication and words are its tools. Language proves to be a barrier at different levels, such as semantic (meaning), syntactic (grammar), phonological (pronunciation, intonation, pitch etc.) and finally linguistic (across languages) Thus, language barriers can arise in different ways:

- a. Jargon or unfamiliar terminology - There are some special terms or technical words used by people belonging to a certain group or field of work such as doctors, lawyers, computer software engineers or college students. They use words which are their own, specialised jargon which cannot be understood by anyone outside their group.
- b. Difference in language – Unfamiliar language becomes a barrier when people do not know each other's language. This barrier can be overcome by using a common medium of communication, as in a classroom. Translation is also an important way of overcoming this barrier.
- c. Words are of two kinds: extensional and intentional words. Extensional words are clear in their meaning and therefore do not create barriers – such as words like boy, chair, garden etc. Intentional words are words that describe and they can be understood differently by different people, according to the meaning that a person

gives to the word. Thus good, bad, beautiful are intentional words, and a simple sentence like she is a good girl. can create confusion because the meaning of the word 'good' is unclear.

- d. Sometimes, the same word is used in different contexts, giving rise totally different meanings. A word like 'hard', for example can be used in different ways: hard chair, hard-hearted, hard drink, having a hard time – all these use the same word but the meanings are different.
- e. Barriers can be created when we come across words, which have the same sound when pronounced, but which mean very different things. Examples: words like fair and fare; bear and bare; council and counsel.

3. Psychological barriers:

Psyche means mind. Psychological barriers are created in the mind. Communication is a mental activity and its aim is to create understanding. But the human mind is complex and not all communication can result in understanding. There are several kinds of psychological barriers which can come in the way of understanding.

(a) Emotions: Emotions are among the most common psychological barriers to communication. The emotion may be connected to the communication received or it may be present in the sender's or receiver's mind, even before the communication takes place. In both cases, it acts as a barrier. Emotions can be positive, like happiness and joy, or negative, like fear, anger, mistrust etc. Both positive and negative emotions act as barriers, if they are not kept in check.

(b) Prejudice: A prejudice is an opinion held by a person for which there is no rational basis or valid reason. It can be against something or someone, or in favour of it, but it becomes a barrier to a meaningful communication. Prejudices are based on ignorance and lack of information, e.g., prejudices about certain communities or groups of people.

(c) Halo effect: Sometimes our reactions to people are not balanced or objective; they are of an extreme nature. Either we like a person so much that we can find no shortcomings in her/him, or we dislike someone so much that we can see nothing good in her/him. In both cases, we commit errors of judgment and fail to understand the person.

(d) Self-image or different perceptions: Every person has in her/his mind a certain image of herself/himself. S/he thinks of herself/himself in a certain way. This is their perception of themselves, their self-image. One's self-image is the product of one's heredity, one's environment and one's experiences, and thus every person's self-image is unique and different from the others. Self-image can create a barrier because we accept communication

which is compatible with our self-image. We avoid or reject communication, which goes against our perception of ourselves.

(e) Closed Mind: A closed mind is one which refuses to accept an idea or opinion on a subject, because it is different from his idea. Such persons form their opinion on a subject, and then refuse to listen to anyone who has something different to say about it. A closed mind may be the result of some past experience or just habit. It is very difficult to remove this psychological barrier.

(f) Status: Status refers to rank or position. It could be economic, social or professional status. In any organisation, hierarchy creates differences in rank, and this is a normal situation. Thus, status by itself does not cause barriers; but when a person becomes too conscious of his status, whether high or low, then status becomes a barrier. For instance, in a business organisation, a senior executive who is unduly conscious of his seniority will not communicate properly with his juniors, and will refrain from giving them the required information. Similarly, if a junior is acutely conscious of his junior status, he will avoid communicating with his seniors, even when it is necessary

(g) Inattentiveness and Impatience: Sometimes the receiver may not pay attention to the sender's message, or he may be too impatient to hear the message fully and properly. Such barriers are common in oral communication.

Overcoming psychological barriers:

1. Adopt flexible and open-minded attitude
 2. Training of listening skills
 3. Exposure to different environment, views will help to broaden outlook
 4. Listening with empathy helps in making oneself more adapting to other's perceptions.
4. **Cross-cultural barriers:** Mary Allen Guffey defines communication as ,”the complex system of values, traits, morals and customs shared by a society.”

Cultural diversity within a country, and cultural differences between people from different countries, are a major cause of barriers. This is because people are conditioned by their cultures, and they develop certain habits of working, communicating, eating, dressing etc. according to their cultural conditioning. They find it difficult to get through to people who come from an alien culture, and who have different habits. A simple thing like a greeting to welcome a person is vastly different in India from a greeting in, for example, an Arab country, or in Japan. Food and dress habits of a different culture can make a person uncomfortable. Concepts of space and time are also different across cultures; for example, Indians do not mind sitting close to each other and sharing space in offices or in public places. However, a European would not be able to tolerate such intrusive

behaviour. Similarly, people who come from a culture where time is very valuable will be impatient with those who come from a culture with an easygoing attitude towards time, where everything is done in a slow, unhurried way.

- a. Cultural diversity
- b. Time
- c. Space
- d. Food
- e. Manners
- f. Decision making

Overcoming Barriers :

Barriers disrupt communication and interfere with understanding. They must be overcome if communication has to be effective.

Physical barriers are comparatively easier to overcome. The use of loudspeakers and microphones can remove the barriers of noise and distance in crowded places like railway stations. Traffic signals and non-verbal gestures of the traffic policeman remove physical barriers on the roads. Technological advancement has helped in reducing the communication gap arising due to time and distance. It is possible to make an alternative arrangement, should the technological instruments fail. A back-up plan helps in tidying over any snag.

Language or Semantic Barriers can be overcome if the sender and the receiver choose a language which both of them understand very well. Help from a translator or an interpreter also helps in overcoming the language barrier. Exposure to the target language and training oneself in the acquisition of skills of the given language too help in overcoming the language barrier. Language barriers can be avoided by careful study and accurate use of language. Clarity should be the main objective when using language. Jargon should be avoided.

Psychological barriers, as also **cross-cultural barriers** are difficult to overcome, as they are difficult to identify and even more difficult to address. Even these can be avoided or reduced by adopting a flexible and open-minded attitude. The ultimate aim is to build bridges of understanding between people – that is the main aim of communication. Training oneself to listen to different views, exposing oneself to different environments help in broadening one's outlook and cultivating tolerance to multiple views. Teaching oneself to listen with empathy helps in making oneself more open to others' perceptions.

While dealing with psychological or cross-cultural barriers the sender should make it a point to–

- (i) use language that is politically neutral and correct.
- (ii) present views in simple and objective manner
- (iii) focus on the objective of communication