

## **Writing for Business**

### **Lecture 3: Barriers to Effective Organizational Communication; Intercultural Differences; Listening Skills and Etiquette; and Ethics in Communication**

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#### **Learning Objectives**

By the end of this lesson, you should be able to:

- Describe the barriers to effective communication
- Explain the effects of intercultural differences in business writing
- Describe the listening skills and etiquette required for organizational communication
- Evaluate ethical aspects of business communication

#### **1.0 Introduction**

Let's begin by recapping what we learned during Lecture 2. We focused primarily on the nature of organization, where we discussed the management theories guiding organizational operations. We learned of the classical approach, scientific management theory, and bureaucracy, which emphasize increased productivity through specialization, hierarchy, functionality, etc. On the other end of the spectrum are theoretical approaches that value the human relations element as noted in the Hawthorne experiments by Elton Mayo and open systems theory. We also looked at formal and informal communication comprising of downward, upward, horizontal, external and diagonal communication. Today, let's begin by examining the barriers to effective communication.

#### **1.1 Barriers to Effective Communication**

Taylor (2005) identifies the following barriers to communication at the workplace:

- a) Non-verbal signals such as facial expressions, eye movement, nodding the head, and gestures. Sending the wrong signal can interfere with message reception. Sometimes, people across cultures might misunderstand these signals.
- b) Language can be a barrier due to differences in our backgrounds and experiences, different foreign languages or dialects, differences in accents, and use of jargon. Sometimes, differences are realized in the use of words with different meanings.
- c) Listening is a skill that some people have taken for granted. Not paying attention to a speaker constitutes a barrier. For effective communication, listeners need to pay attention to the words used, the way the communication is expressed, the speaker, and the communication itself.
- d) Pre-judgment can be a barrier to effective communication because our understanding is conditioned by what we already know as well as our experience and background knowledge. We tend to hear what we want to hear and what we think we have heard.
- e) Relationships can hinder communication if we do not enjoy a good relationship with the deliverer of the message.
- f) Emotional responses can hinder communication. A person who is insecure, angry, or fearful can get emotional and cause a communication breakdown.

g) Systems that are dysfunctional can serve as obstacles to effective communication.

On her part, Joshi (n.d.) defines communication barriers as interferences or obstacles which affect not only the transmission of ideas or information but also the understanding and acceptance of it. She identifies three main causes of these barriers: Sender deficiencies, receiver deficiencies, and inappropriate means of communication. These are explained below:

- Sender-oriented barriers, which include lack of planning, lack of clarity about the purpose of communication, improper choice of words resulting in a badly encoded message, difference in perception, wrong choice of channel, etc.
- Receiver-oriented barriers like poor listening, lack of interest, difference in perception, biased attitude, etc.
- Channel-oriented barriers such as noise, wrong selection of medium, technical defects, etc.

Joshi (n.d.) also identifies the following barriers to effective communication, and I will explore them using examples:

1. Physical or environmental barriers
2. Physiological barriers
3. Semantic or language barriers
4. Personal barriers
5. Emotional barriers
6. Socio- psychological barriers
7. Cultural barriers
8. Organizational barriers

### **1.1.2 Physical or environment barriers**

- Communication can be affected by actual noise in the physical environment. Think of a final grade candidate taking an exam in a school setting but there are lower class children out on break who are shouting and playing. Noise can also come in the form of a low-flying plane, loud music, loud volume from the TV, loud laughter, heavy rain especially if the roof is made of iron sheets, etc. In essence, what this means for the organization is that employees need to be aware of physical noise. For example, singing loudly in a room with colleagues trying to concentrate; playing loud music, shouting while talking in a quiet room, shouting on the phone, and so on.
- Time and distance are considered physical barriers. Imagine you work for a non-profit organization and need to push a hashtag on X (formerly Twitter) for the next six hours. Your target audience lives in America with an 8-hour time difference. If you post the message at a time when the Americans have retired for the night, your message may not get the attention it deserves.
- Wrong medium choice can affect communication. For example, if you want to communicate with your supervisor urgently, and send an email instead of word-of-mouth or a phone call. It's possible the supervisor may not see the communication on time.

- Weather patterns can hinder effective communication. Imagine attending a seminar in a room with very high temperatures without air conditioning, or the converse: very cold settings without the comfort of a heater. Chances are you will be uncomfortable or too cold to pay attention.
- Poorly expressed communication is a barrier because the listener may likely not understand. For instance, if a supervisor used complex words for instructions, it is likely that the work will not get done.

### **1.1.3 Physiological /Biological barriers**

Did you know that hunger can be a physiological barrier? Think about being in a room the whole day listening to speakers yet you have eaten nothing since morning. It means your attention span will begin to wane until you lose concentration and begin thinking about when you will have food. Examples of biological barriers include a boss who stammers, an employee with hearing impairment, someone with eye problems, etc.

### **1.1.4 Semantic/Language barriers**

The way we use language can affect communication. Semantics refers to the study of meaning in language. The following are types of semantic barriers:

- Word misinterpretation such as farther/further; lie/lay; climactic/climatic; elicit/illicit, etc.
- Use of jargon. Jargon refers to special words used by professionals and which may appear difficult to ordinary people. For example, if you visit a doctor and he diagnoses you as having cerebrovascular accident (stroke) or myocardial infarction (heart attack), you will definitely require him to simplify the terms for you.

### **1.1.5 Personal barriers**

Personality differences among people can present obstacles in organizational communication. We all come from different backgrounds and orientations, and so carry various value system. Our attitudes and opinions shape how we view the world and how we relate to other people. For instance, a supervisor who comes from a culture where utmost respect is accorded to senior people may have trouble working with a junior who has been taught that age does not matter as long as the work gets done.

### **1.1.6 Emotional barriers**

Our feelings or emotions affect communication. Emotional barriers might come in these three forms:

- Blocked mind. Some people are not open to new suggestions or looking at an issue in any other way. Suppose the company has announced a significant change that will affect the organisation. For instance, Employee A has to shift to Department B in a new role. Management believes Employee A will perform better in the new department. However, because Employee A is rigid-minded and believes he has been performing exceptionally well in a familiar role, he may opt to resign or stay and pick up the new position. Because his mind is set against the new position, he already has no motivation and his attitude is negative, and this will impact on his performance.
- Bias and Prejudice. We carry biases in life and sometimes they may be irrational. We may be biased against someone due to age, gender, socio-economic status, religion, race,

ethnicity, among others. Sometimes we are biased because we carry certain stereotypes. For example, Employee B might have issues with people from a certain ethnic group and assume all people from that group are the same. This prejudice may cause him/her not to enjoy a good relationship with the employee from the said ethnic group.

- Emotions. We go through a series of emotions the entire day. For example, if you are set to give a speech in a conference where you are representing your organization, you may go through various emotions, such as nervousness, tension, worry, fear, etc. Our lives also give rise to certain emotions within us, such as anger, joy, sadness, anxiety, etc. These can interfere with performance at work. For instance, if I am experiencing a bad marriage that is taking a heavy toll on me, I may be stressed without even realizing it and end up shouting at my colleague, thereby affecting workplace communication.

### **1.1.7 Socio-psychological barriers**

These barriers have got to do with perception and include the following:

- Selective perception where the receiver hears only what they want to hear. The receiving of messages is based on their needs, experiences, expectations, and motivations. For example, it is 4.30pm and Employee C is looking forward to an alumni meeting at 5.30pm across the city. The supervisor sends him an email to ask him to complete a certain report required for a meeting on Friday. Because it is Thursday, he/she decides that it must be the following Friday, so closes the office and leaves, intending to work on it the following day when he/she reports.
- Halo Effect describes a phenomenon known as cognitive bias where the overall impression of a person influences how others feel and think about a person's specific traits (Cherry, 2024). The halo effect is majorly a physical appearance phenomenon. For example, just because James is attractive, he is also smart. The halo effect can be a barrier because James may not be smart after all.
- Status consciousness. One's status can affect communication. For instance, if Nancy perceives of her boss as very knowledgeable because of his status at work, she may undermine her own abilities, and this can result in poor performance.
- Physical appearance. There are times we make judgments based on one's physical appearance. We may judge harshly someone who dresses poorly, perhaps in old, oversized suits. Consequently, we may dismiss this person's competency based on personal appearance. For instance, an IT expert who appears poorly dressed yet is a guru in his field.

### **1.1.8 Cultural barriers**

Since we don't all come from the same cultural background, our cultural differences may cause communication barriers. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines culture as "the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterize an institution or organization." Among the Maasai of Kenya, a younger person should not extend the hand to greet an elder. Instead, they bow a little so that the elder can lightly touch the tip of the young person's head. However, in some cultures like in the West, a firm handshake, regardless of age, is the right thing to do, and which can bring business on board.

### **1.1.9 Organizational barriers**

Organizational barriers are found at three levels:

- Complex organisational structures. Some companies are huge with several senior managers, supervisors, heads of departments, section heads, etc. Unless a clear internal communication strategy is in place, messages may get lost in the complexity of the system.
- Multiple organizational levels. Some organizations are so bureaucratic that delays and message distortions may arise. For instance, before cash is released to serve a particular purpose, four people must sign against the authorizing document. If one person falls sick that day and fails to report to work, there could be a delay as the company grapples with resolving that issue.
- Pressure of time. Some organizations thrive when they observe time. For example, a daily newspaper must lock into the system all the stories for the following day's newspaper by a particular time. Thus, the rush might cause misinformation, disinformation, grammatical errors and other mistakes. For example, getting the date wrong in a story.

### **1.2 Intercultural Differences in Communication**

Adler and Elmhorst (2010) argue that diversity is a fact of life in the world of work today. Take the case of Dubai, where almost every nation on the globe is represented. Besides being inhabited by the Emirati, the indigenous local population, Dubai has attracted people from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, USA, the UK, Nigeria, Somali, Canada, Russia, and so on. All over the globe, businesses are expanding, especially in today's technological age, necessitating massive movements of people who may now find themselves in the same work environment. Each of these groups of people have a cultural background, which is shaped by factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, race, language, and socio-economic status. The differences in these cultural factors can cause communication ineffectiveness.

Adler and Elmhorst (2010) identify the following cultural differences in doing business. You can read more about them in the book:

1. Differences in customs and behaviour
  - a) Formality
  - b) Social customs
  - c) Styles of dress
  - d) Time
  - e) Tolerance for conflict
  - f) Gender roles
2. Fundamental dimensions of cultural diversity
  - a) High vs low context
  - b) Individualism vs collectivism
  - c) Power distance
  - d) Uncertainty avoidance
  - e) Tasks vs social orientation
  - f) Short vs long-term orientation
3. Co-cultural dimensions of a diverse society

- a) Language
  - b) Regional differences
  - c) Ethnicity
  - d) Generational differences
  - e) Disabilities
4. Communicating across diversity
- a) Become culturally literate
  - b) View diversity as an opportunity
  - c) Avoid ethnocentrism
  - d) Don't condescend
  - e) Create dialogue

### **1.3 Listening**

There is a difference between hearing and listening. Hearing is a physiological process when the ear absorbs sounds and transfers them along neural pathways to parts of the brain. Listening on the other hand is a deliberate effort by a person to pay attention to something. Active listening is hard work because it involves much more than passively taking in information.

Listening is very important because it strengthens a company and allows businesses to progress. For example, a company owner who does not listen to employee complaints might experience a high turnover or organized protests by the employees. Listening saves time and resources for both the communicator and the recipient. For instance, the company plumber tells the boss that some pipes require urgent replacement, but the employer does nothing about it. One day, the pipes burst and the company is flooded leading to huge loss of property and time. Adler and Elmhorst (2010) opine that effective listening saves money, boosts productivity, and improves quality, while the opposite is true.

#### **1.3.1 Listening Styles**

Adler and Elmhorst (2010) suggest the following listening styles:

1. People-oriented
2. Action-oriented
3. Content-oriented
4. Time-oriented

Those who practice people-oriented listening tend to focus more on listening to create and maintain positive relationships. They are not interested in judging others; rather, they seek to understand and support them. However, they can be overly concerned, which may be construed as intrusion into people's lives

Action-oriented listening is more about the task at hand and to understand the ideas or facts being communicated about the task. These listeners like dealing with clear, concise communication. Nevertheless, they may come off as abrasive, which may hurt communication.

Content-oriented listening involves evaluation of an issue to gain multiple perspectives. These are analytical people who want to listen to the experts and credible sources, but may annoy those who do not appreciate their detail-oriented approach.

Time-oriented people view time as a resource to be exploited for efficiency. They view it as scarce and valuable and are not patient with those they perceive as time-wasters. However, some tasks do require a lot of time and this can cause collision. Besides, content-oriented listeners can create strained relationships when they insist on time-keeping.

The authors identify the following barriers to effective listening:

1. Physiological barriers
  - Hearing problems
  - Rapid thought
2. Environmental barriers
  - Physical distractions
  - Problems in the communication channel
  - Message overload
3. Attitudinal barriers and false assumptions
  - Preoccupation
  - Egocentrism
  - Fear of appearing ignorant
  - Assuming that effective communication is the sender's responsibility
  - Assuming that listening is passive
  - Assuming that talking has more advantages than listening
4. Socio-cultural differences
  - Cultural differences
  - Gender differences
  - Lack of training

### **1.3.2 Listening More Effectively**

1. Listening to understand
  - Withhold judgement
  - Talk and interrupt less
  - Ask questions
  - Paraphrase
  - Attend to non-verbal cues
2. Listening to evaluate
  - Analyze the speaker's evidence
  - Examine emotional appeals

## **1.4 Etiquette**

Business Etiquette refer to intangible skills- these are good manners and a professional attitude in the work environment (Smith, 2019).

You will undertake an activity concerning business etiquette, which I have indicated at the end of this lecture.

## **1.5 Ethics in Technical Communication**

Business writing is also technical communication, guided by certain rules and regulations. Even though these are not laws, organizations should regulate themselves to ensure they meet the highest standards of ethics.

(Smith, 201) summarizes the dos and don'ts of technical/business writing:

- Not falsifying data or stating as truth something we know is untrue
- Not deliberately misrepresenting information or facts
- Distinguishing between fact and opinion
- Not assuming that what an “expert” has said is true
- Avoiding language that tries to evade responsibility eg “An error was committed”, instead of identifying the person who committed the error
- Avoiding language that confuses the reader, such as using abstract words, jargon, euphemisms, etc.
- Not using visual communication to mislead, distract, or deceive readers
- Not violating anyone's rights
- Ensuring that we are acting in our audience's best interest
- Not manipulating our readers
- Not stereotyping our readers
- Avoiding plagiarism

## **1.6 Conclusion**

We started off by examining the barriers to effective communication, and these include physical, physiological, socio-psychological, semantic or language, cultural, personal, emotional, and organizational barriers. We must all be alive to these barriers to improve communication and perform effectively and efficiently. We also learned that since we exist in a global context, we definitely have differences that can impede effective communication. For instance, we have different customs and behavior, fundamental dimensions of our cultural diversity, and we do experience co-cultural dimensions of a diverse society. To resolve the communication barriers occasioned by intercultural differences, we must learn to communicate across diversity, such as being culturally literate. Listening is also an important communication dynamic, that when not properly executed, can lead to communication breakdown. Thus, we must purpose to listen effectively through listening to understand and evaluate. Lastly, we briefly looked at the ethics of business writing and learned that writing too is governed by a set of rules such as not misleading readers through visual communication.

## 1.7 Homework

Read the following entire webpage and watch the two videos attached, then write a summary.

<https://pressbooks.nsc.ca/communicationskills/chapter/chapter-46-professional-etiquette/>

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