

8.3: Communication Barriers

Learning Objectives

1. Understand different ways that the communication process can be sidetracked.
2. Understand the role poor listening plays in communication problems.
3. Understand what active listening is.
4. Learn strategies to become a more effective listener.

Barriers to Effective Communication

The biggest single problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

George Bernard Shaw

Filtering

Filtering is the distortion or withholding of information to manage a person's reactions. Some examples of filtering include a manager's keeping a division's negative sales figures from a superior, in this case, the vice president. The old saying, "Don't shoot the messenger!" illustrates the tendency of receivers to vent their negative response to unwanted messages to the sender. A gatekeeper (the vice president's assistant, perhaps) who doesn't pass along a complete message is also filtering. Additionally, the vice president may delete the e-mail announcing the quarter's sales figures before reading it, blocking the message before it arrives.

As you can see, filtering prevents members of an organization from getting the complete picture of a situation. To maximize your chances of sending and receiving effective communications, it's helpful to deliver a message in multiple ways and to seek information from multiple sources. In this way, the impact of any one person's filtering will be diminished.

Since people tend to filter bad news more during upward communication, it is also helpful to remember that those below you in an organization may be wary of sharing bad news. One way to defuse this tendency to filter is to reward employees who clearly convey information upward, regardless of whether the news is good or bad.

Here are some of the criteria that individuals may use when deciding whether to filter a message or pass it on:

1. *Past experience*: Were previous senders rewarded for passing along news of this kind in the past, or were they criticized?
2. *Knowledge and perception of the speaker*: Has the receiver's direct superior made it clear that "no news is good news?"
3. *Emotional state, involvement with the topic, and level of attention*: Does the sender's fear of failure or criticism prevent the message from being conveyed? Is the topic within the sender's realm of expertise, increasing confidence in the ability to decode the message, or is the sender out of a personal comfort zone when it comes to evaluating the message's significance? Are personal concerns impacting the sender's ability to judge the message's value?

Once again, filtering can lead to miscommunications in business. Listeners translate messages into their own words, each creating a unique version of what was said (Alessandra, 1993).

Selective Perception

Small things can command our attention when we're visiting a new place—a new city or a new company. Over time, however, we begin to make assumptions about the environment based on our past experiences. **Selective perception** refers to filtering what we see and hear to suit our own needs. This process is often unconscious. We are bombarded with too much stimuli every day to pay equal attention to everything, so we pick and choose according to our own needs. Selective perception is a time-saver, a necessary tool in a complex culture. But it can also lead to mistakes.

Think back to the example conversation between the person asked to order more toner cartridges and his boss earlier in this chapter. Since Bill found the to-do list from his boss to be unreasonably demanding, he assumed the request could wait. (How else could he do everything else on the list?) The boss, assuming that Bill had heard the urgency in her request, assumed that Bill would place the order before returning to previously stated tasks. Both members of this organization were using selective perception to evaluate the communication. Bill's perception was that the task could wait. The boss's perception was that a time frame was clear, though unstated. When two selective perceptions collide, a misunderstanding occurs.

Information Overload

Messages reach us in countless ways every day. Some messages are societal—advertisements that we may hear or see in the course of our day. Others are professional—e-mails, memos, and voice mails, as well as conversations with our colleagues. Others are personal—messages from and conversations with our loved ones and friends.

Add these together and it's easy to see how we may be receiving more information than we can take in. This state of imbalance is known as [information overload](#), which occurs “when the information processing demands on an individual's time to perform interactions and internal calculations exceed the supply or capacity of time available for such processing” (Schick, Gordon, & Haka, 1990). Others note that information overload is “a symptom of the high-tech age, which is too much information for one human being to absorb in an expanding world of people and technology. It comes from all sources including TV, newspapers, and magazines as well as wanted and unwanted regular mail, e-mail and faxes. It has been exacerbated enormously because of the formidable number of results obtained from Web search engines.”^[1] Other research shows that working in such fragmented fashion significantly impacts efficiency, creativity, and mental acuity (Overholt, 2001).



Figure 8.3.5: A field study found that managers can expect, on average, to do only 3 minutes of uninterrupted work on any one task before being interrupted by an incoming e-mail, instant message, phone call, coworker, or other distraction (González & Gloria, 2004). Kathleen Leavitt Cragun – [Swedish Hard Hat Tour](#) – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Going back to our example of Bill, let's say he's in his office on the phone with a supplier. While he's talking, he hears the chime of his e-mail alerting him to an important message from his boss. He's scanning through it quickly while still on the phone when a coworker pokes her head into his office saying Bill's late for a staff meeting. The supplier on the other end of the phone line has just given him a choice among the products and delivery dates he requested. Bill realizes he missed hearing the first two options, but he doesn't have time to ask the supplier to repeat them all or to try reconnecting with him at a later time. He chooses the third option—at least he heard that one, he reasons, and it seemed fair. How good was Bill's decision amidst all the information he was processing at the same time?

Emotional Disconnects

An effective communication requires a sender and a receiver who are open to speaking and listening to one another, despite possible differences in opinion or personality. One or both parties may have to put their emotions aside to achieve the goal of communicating clearly. A receiver who is emotionally upset tends to ignore or distort what the sender is saying. A sender who is emotionally upset may be unable to present ideas or feelings effectively.

Lack of Source Familiarity or Credibility

Have you ever told a joke that fell flat? You and the receiver lacked the common context that could have made it funny. (Or yes, it could have just been a lousy joke.) Sarcasm and irony are subtle and, therefore, they are potentially hurtful commodities in business. It's best to keep these types of communications out of the workplace, as their benefits are limited, and their potential dangers are great. Lack of familiarity with the sender can lead to misinterpreting humor, especially in less-rich information channels such as e-mail. For example, an e-mail from Jill that ends with, “Men should be boiled in vats of oil,” could be interpreted as antimalware if the receiver didn't know that Jill has a penchant for exaggeration and always jokes to let off steam. Similarly, if the

sender lacks credibility or is untrustworthy, the message will not get through. Receivers may be suspicious of the sender's motivations (Why is she telling me this?). Likewise, if the sender has communicated erroneous information in the past or has created false emergencies, the current message may be filtered.

Workplace Gossip

The informal gossip network known as the [grapevine](#) is a lifeline for many employees seeking information about their company (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). Researchers agree that the grapevine is an inevitable part of organizational life. Research finds that 70% of all organizational communication occurs at the grapevine level (Crampton, 1998). Employees trust their peers as a source of information, but the grapevine's informal structure can be a barrier to effective communication from the managerial point of view. Its grassroots structure gives it greater credibility in the minds of employees than information delivered through official channels, even when that information is false. Some downsides of the office grapevine are that gossip offers politically minded insiders a powerful tool for disseminating communication (and self-promoting miscommunications) within an organization. In addition, the grapevine lacks a specific sender, which can create a sense of distrust among employees: Who is at the root of the gossip network? When the news is volatile, suspicions may arise as to the person or person behind the message. Managers who understand the grapevine's power can use it to send and receive messages of their own. They can also decrease the grapevine's power by sending official messages quickly and accurately, should big news arise.

Semantics

Words can mean different things to different people, or they might not mean anything to another person. This is called [semantics](#). For example, companies often have their own acronyms and buzzwords (called business [jargon](#)) that are clear to them but impenetrable to outsiders. For example, at IBM, GBS is focusing on BPTS, using expertise acquired from the PwC purchase (which had to be sold to avoid conflicts of interest in light of SOX) to fend off other BPO providers and inroads by the Bangalore tiger. Does this make sense to you? If not, here's the translation: IBM's Global Business Services (GBS) division is focusing on offering companies Business Process Transformation Services (BPTS), using the expertise it acquired from purchasing the management consulting and technology services arm of PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), which had to sell the division due to the Sarbanes-Oxley Act (SOX; enacted in response to the major accounting scandals such as Enron). The added management expertise puts it above business process outsourcing (BPO) vendors who focus more on automating processes rather than transforming and improving them. Chief among these BPO competitors is Wipro, often called the "Bangalore tiger" because of its geographic origin and aggressive growth. Given the amount of messages we send and receive everyday, it makes sense that humans would try to find a shortcut—a way to communicate things in code. In business, this code is known as jargon. Jargon is the language of specialized terms used by a group or profession. It is common shorthand among experts and if used sensibly can be a quick and efficient way of communicating. Most jargon consists of unfamiliar terms, abstract words, nonexistent words, acronyms, and abbreviations, with an occasional euphemism thrown in for good measure. Every profession, trade, and organization has its own specialized terms (Wright, 2008).

At first glance, jargon sounds like a good thing—a quicker way to send an effective communication similar to the way text message abbreviations can send common messages in a shorter, yet understandable way. But that's not always how things happen. Jargon can be an obstacle to effective communication, causing listeners to tune out or fostering ill feelings between partners in a conversation. When jargon rules the day, the message can get obscured. A key question to ask yourself before using a phrase of jargon is, "Who is the receiver of my message?" If you are a specialist speaking to another specialist in your area, jargon may be the best way to send a message while forging a professional bond—similar to the way best friends can communicate in code. For example, an IT technician communicating with another IT technician may use jargon as a way of sharing information in a way that reinforces the pair's shared knowledge. But that same conversation should be held in Standard English, free of jargon, when communicating with staff members outside the IT group.

Online Follow-Up

Eighty buzz words in the business can be found at the following Web site:

http://www.amanet.org/movingahead/editorial2002_2003/nov03_80buzzwords.htm

A discussion of why slang is a problem can be found at the following Web site:

<http://sbinfoCanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechless5.htm>

In addition, the OB Toolbox below will help you avoid letting business jargon get in your way at work.

OB Toolbox: Tips for Reducing Miscommunication-by-Jargon

- *Know your audience.* If they weren't sitting beside you in law school, medical school, or in that finance or computer class, then assume they don't know what you are talking about. Speak for the other person and not yourself.
- *Decode your acronyms.* If you use an acronym in verbal or written communication, explain what it means after you use it for the first time. Your audience will filter your message otherwise, as they wonder, "Now what does ROI stand for?" (It stands for "return on investment," btw—by the way.)
- *Limit your jargon use.* Jargon doesn't necessarily make you sound smart or business savvy. It can create communication barriers and obstacles and hurts your ability to build relationships and close deals.

Source: Adapted from ideas in Adubato, S. (2005, March 13). Scrap the jargon...Now! Retrieved July 1, 2008, from *The Star-Ledger* Web site: www.stand-deliver.com/star_ledger/050313.asp.

Gender Differences in Communication

Men and women work together every day, but their different styles of communication can sometimes work against them. Generally speaking, women like to ask questions before starting a project, while men tend to "jump right in." A male manager who's unaware of how most women communicate their readiness to work may misperceive a ready employee as not being prepared.

Another difference that has been noticed is that men often speak in sports metaphors, while many women use their home as a starting place for analogies. Women who believe men are "only talking about the game" may be missing out on a chance to participate in a division's strategy and opportunities for teamwork and "rallying the troops" for success (Krotz).

"It is important to promote the best possible communication between men and women in the workplace," notes gender policy advisor Dee Norton, who provided the above example. "As we move between the male and female cultures, we sometimes have to change how we behave (speak the language of the other gender) to gain the best results from the situation. Clearly, successful organizations of the future are going to have leaders and team members who understand, respect, and apply the rules of gender culture appropriately" (CDR Dee Norton, 2008).

As we have seen, differences in men's and women's communication styles can lead to misunderstandings in the workplace. Being aware of these differences, however, can be the first step in learning to work with them instead of around them. Keep in mind that men tend to focus more on competition, data, and orders in their communications, while women tend to focus more on cooperation, intuition, and requests. Both styles can be effective in the right situations, but understanding the differences is a first step in avoiding misunderstandings.

Differences in Meaning Between the Sender and Receiver

"Mean what you say, and say what you mean." It's an easy thing to say. But in business, what do those words mean? Simply put, different words mean different things to different people. Age, education, and cultural background are all factors that influence how a person interprets words. The less we consider our audience, the greater our chances of miscommunication will be. Eliminating jargon is one way of ensuring our words will convey real-world concepts to others. Speaking to our audience, as opposed to speaking about ourselves, is another.

Managers who speak about "long-term goals and profits" to a staff that has received scant raises may find their core message ("You're doing a great job—and that benefits the folks in charge!") has infuriated the group they hoped to inspire. Instead, managers who recognize the contributions of their staff and confirm that this work is contributing to company goals in ways "that will benefit the source of our success—our employees as well as executives," will find that their core message ("You're doing a great job—we really value your work.") is received as intended, rather than being misinterpreted.

Biased Language

Words and actions that stereotype others on the basis of personal or group affiliation are examples of bias. Below is a list of words that have the potential to be offensive. The column on the right provides alternative words that can be used instead (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2003; Miller & Swift, 1980; Procter, 2007).

Figure 8.6

| Avoid | Consider Using |
|-------|----------------|
|-------|----------------|

| | |
|----------------|-------------------------------|
| black attorney | attorney |
| businessman | business person |
| chairman | chair or chairperson |
| cleaning lady | cleaner or maintenance worker |
| male nurse | nurse |
| manpower | staff or personnel |
| secretary | assistant or associate |

Effective communication is clear, factual, and goal-oriented. It is also respectful. Referring to a person by one adjective (a *brain*, a *diabetic*) reduces the person to that one characteristic. Language that inflames or stereotypes a person poisons the communication process. Language that insults an individual or group based on age, ethnicity, sexual preference, or political beliefs violates public and private standards of decency, ranging from civil rights to corporate regulations.

The effort to create a neutral set of terms to refer to heritage and preferences has resulted in a debate over the nature of “political correctness.” Proponents of political correctness see it as a way to defuse the volatile nature of words that stereotyped groups and individuals in the past. Critics of political correctness see its vocabulary as stilted and needlessly cautious.

Many companies offer new employees written guides on standards of speech and conduct. These guides, augmented by common sense and courtesy, are solid starting points for effective, respectful workplace communication.

Tips for appropriate workplace speech include, but are not limited to the following:

- Alternating our use of *he* and *she* when referring to people in general
- Relying on human resources-generated guidelines
- Remembering that terms that feel respectful or comfortable to us may not be comfortable or respectful to others

Poor Listening

The greatest compliment that was ever paid to me was when one asked me what I thought, and attended to my answer.

Henry David Thoreau

A sender may strive to deliver a message clearly. But the receiver’s ability to listen effectively is equally vital to successful communication. The average worker spends 55% of their workdays listening. Managers listen up to 70% each day. Unfortunately, listening doesn’t lead to understanding in every case.

From a number of different perspectives, listening matters. Former Chrysler CEO Lee Iacocca lamented, “I only wish I could find an institute that teaches people how to listen. After all, a good manager needs to listen at least as much as he needs to talk” (Iacocca & Novak, 1984). Research shows that listening skills were related to promotions (Sypher, Bostrom, & Seibert, 1989).

Listening clearly matters. Listening takes practice, skill, and concentration. Alan Gulick, a Starbucks Corporation spokesperson, believes better listening can improve profits. If every Starbucks employee misheard one \$10 order each day, their errors would cost the company a billion dollars annually. To teach its employees to listen, Starbucks created a code that helps employees taking orders hear the size, flavor, and use of milk or decaffeinated coffee. The person making the drink echoes the order aloud.

How Can You Improve Your Listening Skills?

Cicero said, “Silence is one of the great arts of conversation.” How often have we been in a conversation with someone else when we are not really listening but itching to convey our portion? This behavior is known as “rehearsing.” It suggests the receiver has no intention of considering the sender’s message and is actually preparing to respond to an earlier point instead. Effective communication relies on another kind of listening: active listening.

Active listening can be defined as giving full attention to what other people are saying, taking time to understand the points being made, asking questions as needed, and not interrupting at inappropriate times (O*NET Resource Center). Active listening creates a real-time relationship between the sender and receiver by acknowledging the content and receipt of a message. As we’ve seen in the Starbucks example above, repeating and confirming a message’s content offers a way to confirm that the correct content is flowing between colleagues. The process creates a bond between coworkers while increasing the flow and accuracy of messaging.

How Can We Listen Actively?

Carl Rogers gave five rules for active listening:

1. Listen for message content.
2. Listen for feelings.
3. Respond to feelings.
4. Note all cues.
5. Paraphrase and restate.

The good news is that listening is a skill that can be learned (Brownell, 1990). The first step is to decide that we want to listen. Casting aside distractions, such as by reducing background or internal noise, is critical. The receiver takes in the sender's message silently, without speaking.

Second, throughout the conversation, show the speaker that you're listening. You can do this nonverbally by nodding your head and keeping your attention focused on the speaker. You can also do it verbally, by saying things like, "Yes," "That's interesting," or other such verbal cues. As you're listening, pay attention to the sender's body language for additional cues about how they're feeling. Interestingly, silence has a role in active listening. During active listening, we are trying to understand what has been said, and in silence we can consider the implications. We can't consider information and object to it at the same time. That's where the power of silence comes into play. Finally, if anything is not clear to you, ask questions. Confirm that you've heard the message accurately, by repeating back a crucial piece like, "Great, I'll see you at 2:00 p.m. in my office." At the end of the conversation, a thank you from both parties is an optional but highly effective way of acknowledging each other's teamwork.

Becoming a More Effective Listener

As we've seen above, active listening creates a more dynamic relationship between a receiver and a sender. It strengthens personal investment in the information being shared. It also forges healthy working relationships among colleagues by making speakers and listeners equally valued members of the communication process.

Many companies offer public speaking courses for their staff, but what about "public listening"? Here are some more ways you can build your listening skills by becoming a more effective listener and banishing communication freezers from your discussions.

OB Toolbox: 10 Ways to Improve Your Listening Habits

1. *Start by stopping.* Take a moment to inhale and exhale quietly before you begin to listen. Your job as a listener is to receive information openly and accurately.
2. *Don't worry about what you'll say when the time comes.* Silence can be a beautiful thing.
3. *Join the sender's team.* When the sender pauses, summarize what you believe has been said. "What I'm hearing is that we need to focus on marketing as well as sales. Is that correct?" Be attentive to physical as well as verbal communications. "I hear you saying that we should focus on marketing, but the way you're shaking your head tells me the idea may not really appeal to you—is that right?"
4. *Don't multitask while listening.* Listening is a full-time job. It's tempting to multitask when you and the sender are in different places, but doing that is counterproductive. The human mind can only focus on one thing at a time. Listening with only part of your brain increases the chances that you'll have questions later, ultimately requiring more of the speaker's time. (And when the speaker is in the same room, multitasking signals a disinterest that is considered rude.)
5. *Try to empathize with the sender's point of view.* You don't have to agree, but can you find common ground?
6. *Confused? Ask questions.* There's nothing wrong with admitting you haven't understood the sender's point. You may even help the sender clarify the message.
7. *Establish eye contact.* Making eye contact with the speaker (if appropriate for the culture) is important.
8. *What is the goal of this communication?* Ask yourself this question at different points during the communication to keep the information flow on track. Be polite. Differences in opinion can be the starting point of consensus.
9. *It's great to be surprised.* Listen with an open mind, not just for what you want to hear.
10. *Pay attention to what is not said.* Does the sender's body language seem to contradict the message? If so, clarification may be in order.

Sources: Adapted from information in Barrett, D. J. (2006). *Leadership communication*. New York: McGraw-Hill/Irwin; Improving verbal skills. (1997). Retrieved July 1, 2008, from the *Institute for Management* Web site:

<http://www.itstime.com/aug97.htm>; Ten tips: Active listening. (2007, June 4). Retrieved July 1, 2008, from the *Communication at Work* Web site: <http://communication.atwork-network.com/2007/06/04/ten-tips-active-listening/>.

Communication Freezers

Communication freezers put an end to effective communication by making the receiver feel judged or defensive. Typical communication stoppers include criticizing, blaming, ordering, judging, or shaming the other person. Some examples of things to avoid saying include the following:

1. Telling the other person what to do:
 - “You must...”
 - “You cannot...”
2. Threatening with “or else” implied:
 - “You had better...”
 - “If you don’t...”
3. Making suggestions or telling the other person what they ought to do:
 - “You should...”
 - “It’s your responsibility to...”
4. Attempting to educate the other person:
 - “Let me give you the facts.”
 - “Experience tells us that...”
5. Judging the other person negatively:
 - “You’re not thinking straight.”
 - “You’re wrong.”
6. Giving insincere praise:
 - “You have so much potential.”
 - “I know you can do better than this.”
7. Psychoanalyzing the other person:
 - “You’re jealous.”
 - “You have problems with authority.”
8. Making light of the other person’s problems by generalizing:
 - “Things will get better.”
 - “Behind every cloud is a silver lining.”
9. Asking excessive or inappropriate questions:
 - “Why did you do that?”
 - “Who has influenced you?”
10. Making light of the problem by kidding:
 - “Think about the positive side.”
 - “You think you’ve got problems!”

Sources: Adapted from information in Tramel, M., & Reynolds, H. (1981). *Executive leadership*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall; Saltman, D., & O’Dea, N. Conflict management workshop PowerPoint presentation. Retrieved July 1, 2008, from http://www.nswrpn.com.au/client_images/6806.PDF; Communication stoppers. Retrieved July 1, 2008, from *Mental Health Today* Web site: <http://www.mental-health-today.com/Healing/communicationstop.htm>.

Key Takeaways

Many barriers to effective communication exist. Examples include filtering, selective perception, information overload, emotional disconnects, lack of source credibility, workplace gossip, gender differences, and semantics. The receiver can enhance the probability of effective communication by engaging in active listening.

Exercises

1. Most people are poor listeners. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Please support your position.
2. Please share an example of how differences in shared meaning have affected you.
3. When you see a memo or e-mail full of typos, poor grammar, or incomplete sentences, how do you react? Does it affect your perception of the sender? Why or why not?
4. Give an example of selective perception.
5. Do you use jargon at work or in your classes? If so, do you think it helps or hampers communication? Why or why not?

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