

## Chapter 2

### COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

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As communicators we always wish to be effective in achieving the desired purpose of communication. However, we may not be successful in doing so because of the presence of a number of obstacles or noise sources. Noise is inevitable in communication. All communication contain noise of some kind, you cannot eliminate noise completely, you can reduce noise and its effect (DeVito, 1997). Some common noise sources or barriers to effective communication are:

**Differing frames of reference:** Source and receiver may face difficulty in communicating with each other when they have different backgrounds. They may not be able to understand each other. For example, an individual with rural background cannot effectively communicate with a person who has never been to a rural area. An illiterate person may find it difficult to interact with a highly qualified person. A well-off farmer may not understand the problems faced by a poor peasant. Such differences are sufficient to create an understanding gap. Burgoon (1974) described the same aspect as homophily (the degree of similarity between source and the receiver) and heterophily (the degree of dissimilarity between the interactants). The best degree of similarity for effective communication is optimal heterophily or slight dissimilarity. Complete homophily may serve as a barrier to communication. The greater is the difference between the interactants, the more difficult the effective communication is likely to be.

**Technical language and jargons:** The goal of communication always is to deliver message in such a way that the receiver understands it. While communicating, some people forget this basic essential and use technical language and jargons perhaps to impress others. In this way they are very unlikely to achieve the basic goal of communication.

**Non-shared word meanings:** As communicators we must recognize that words are only symbols to which we assign meanings and communication involves a compromise of meanings among people. In fact meanings are in the minds of people not in the words (Berlo, 1960). Each person is a unique individual who has his/her own perception of the world. Thus people may have different meanings for the same word. The word 'smart' has entirely different meaning for a Pakistani from that assigned by an American. What a source intends to communicate may not be received at all in the way the source wants it to be received. It may be due to the reason that the codes (languages) have different meanings for different people. That is why it is generally said that language may also facilitate miscommunication. This may be common in people from different cultures and backgrounds interacting with each other. Burgoon (1974) discussed the same concept as 'bypassing'. According to him effective communication does not take place when sender and receiver are at different levels of understanding. Communication fails because word meanings bypass each other. At the root of bypassing problem is the assumption that words themselves have meanings. Bypassing is the result of failing to consider multiple usage of words in communication (ibid).

**Language:** Language is one of the major barriers to effective communication, as there are different languages in different countries, and even different languages or dialects within a single country (Belch and Belch, 2004).

**Attitudes and beliefs:** Our attitudes can only ever be known through the way we communicate. Sometimes people have emotional attachments with some attitudes and beliefs. Thus they do not want to listen against their beliefs. The prior attitude of a receiver affects his/her reaction to a message. A high degree of involvement or emotional attachment will make a receiver less receptive to a message which contradicts the receiver's prior attitude. A person tends to retain messages which are favourable to his/her self image. He/she also tends to forget unfavourable messages more quickly than favourable

ones (Burgoon, 1974). In a traditional Pakistani culture, such matters may relate to family planning, co-education, fatalism etc. It will be hard to get a message accepted which is contrary to the beliefs of the intended receivers.

**Social distance:** Social distance is another barrier to communication. For example, a subordinate may hesitate to communicate freely with his/her boss. On the other hand he/she may feel very comfortable in communicating with people of equal status. Thus the extension agents must try to minimize the social distance between them and their clients as far as possible.

**Contradiction between verbal and non-verbal signals:** Message may be verbal or non-verbal. Sometimes, both verbal and non-verbal signals may be conflicting. For example, a person is getting angry using a very harsh language but with no such signs on his/her face. This situation may be confusing for the receiver that which message is to be believed. DeVito (1997) argues that it is far easier to lie with your mouth than with your body, when the contradiction is observed, it is the non-verbal message that people believe.

**Lack of self confidence:** A source cannot be a good communicator if he/she lacks self confidence no matter how competent he/she is in the subject matter. Confidence is developed through experience.

**Lack of credibility:** Perceived credibility of the source by the receiver may be a serious barrier to effective communication. An incredible source is unlikely to be listened to. A person who is known to have lied is seldom believed, even when telling the truth (DeVito, 1997). A source with high credibility is more effective than one with low credibility. The information from a credible source is more likely to be accepted than that received from an incredible source. Burgoon (1974) identified different dimensions of credibility i.e. competence, knowledge of the subject, character, trustworthiness, composure especially in regard to smoothness of delivery, sociability (the

degree to which the source is perceived as friendly) and extroversion (expressing emotions readily in external actions). According to Lucas (2001) over the years research has discovered that many things affect a speaker's credibility, including sociability, dynamism, physical attractiveness, and perceived similarity between speaker and the audience. Above all a speaker's credibility affected by two factors i.e. competence and character. All these dimensions contribute towards credibility and ultimately affect source's effectiveness as a communicator. Thus a source must be regarded as knowledgeable and trustworthy by the receiver if he/she is to be seen as a good communicator.

**Lack of technical knowledge:** Technical knowledge represents the actual content a source is supposed to deliver to the receiver. It is equally important as communication skills. A source cannot deliver if he/she has nothing to deliver. A source with poor or no technical knowledge is unlikely to be an effective communicator. The more favourably receivers view source's competence, the more likely they are to accept what the source says.

**Lack of communication skills:** A source having no command of communication skills (speaking, writing, listening, reading, thinking) is unlikely to be an effective communicator no matter how knowledgeable he/she is. For example, a person cannot communicate effectively if he/she is unable to speak properly. An outstanding scientist may not at all be a good communicator. Knowledge is something else, how to communicate that knowledge is something else.

**Lack of acquaintance with the receiver:** A source may not be able to communicate effectively if he/she does not know much about his/her receivers, their knowledge, experiences, needs, interests, resources, beliefs, etc. Thus a writer cannot write effectively if he/she does not know his/her readers. Without knowing about readers' ages, occupations, educational and income levels, limitations, prejudices, interests, and dislikes, a writer is like an inexperienced hiker

wandering in a forest of tall redwoods without a compass (Calvert, 1990). Similarly a good speaker would wish to know his/her listeners before making a speech. The better we understand the situations of our intended respondents and appropriately consider it, the more successful we are likely to be in communication.

**Stereotypes:** Stereotypes are over generalized mind pictures that are applied universally to all individuals in a particular class. A stereotype thinking may regard all small farmers to be conservative, fatalistic, non-cooperative, unimaginative, and backward. However, this may not be true because of individual differences. There may be some farmers who are innovative, cooperative, progressive and having reasonably broad world view. A typical stereotype thinking will not recognize these individual differences and will deal all individuals equally according to preconceived ideas. Sometimes it becomes a serious hurdle in effective communication because farmers who are thought to possess certain characteristics are treated that way.

**Suspicious behaviour:** In a situation when source and receiver do not trust each other and they have suspicions in their minds, it is unlikely that they can communicate effectively. For example, a farmer may be suspicious about an investigation about his/her land holding or farm income. In such a situation the farmer is unlikely to provide accurate information rather he/she would hesitate to give any information to the investigator. Thus the development of mutual trust is likely to reduce the possibility of non-cooperative attitude and thereby increases the communication effectiveness.

**Information overload:** Sometimes the source may overestimate the receiver and delivers messages beyond his/her capacity. He/she may not be able to process too much information and thus serves as a serious barrier to effective communication. A good communicator considers the

information needs and mental capabilities of the intended receivers.

**Predispositions of receiver:** A receiver may not be attentive to the message given by a source if he/she is already preoccupied. This may also relate to prior attitudes or preconceived ideas that may be the result of past learning experiences. A good communicator tries to avoid interaction with people when they are busy in some other important task. He should also avoid saying something which is against their preconceived ideas.

**Day dreaming:** Effective communication requires a high level of attention, both on the part of the speaker and the listener. Without attention there is no communication. We may find situations where people may not be fully attentive to the message. They may be physically present but mentally absent, thinking about something else. A good communicator always tries to gain the attention of the receivers and keep them active throughout the session.

**Inappropriate message:** The message may not be relevant to the needs and interests of the receivers. They may perceive it useless. Such message is unlikely to be accepted and acted upon by them. Thus communication will be ineffective if the message is perceived inappropriate by those who are supposed to apply it. For example a message regarding production technologies of cotton may not be of any value to those farmers who do not grow cotton at all.

**Inappropriate communication channels:** Selection of inappropriate channel by the source to communicate a message may serve as a barrier to communication. For example, use of print media for an illiterate audience is unlikely to yield the expected results. Personal channels may not be as effective as the mass media if the purpose of communication is to make a large number of people aware of something.

**Unskilful use of communication channels:** Selection of an appropriate channel may not be sufficient for effective communication, it is the skilful use of that channel by the source which makes it effective. For example in a particular situation, result demonstration may be the most effective channel, but it will only be effective if the extension agent is competent and skilful in conducting the result demonstration.

**Message does not reach the intended audience:** There are chances that the message may not reach the intended audience at all. For example, a radio talk broadcast through a radio station may not be listened by all the intended audience. A letter written by a person may not be received at all by the ultimate receiver.

**Failure to listen:** It is often said that listening is harder than talking. Listening involves three skills hearing, comprehension, and retention (Burgoon, 1974). Some people are poor listeners; they go on talking most of the time. While dealing with such people, we may not expect that our views are properly heard, comprehended and retained by the receiver. This makes communication ineffective and more time consuming.

**Selective behaviour:** We are swimming in a daily sea of communication messages - mass media and interpersonal, intended or unintended. From this tide of messages, we select only a small fraction to which we pay attention (Calvert, 1990). People generally tend to selectively expose themselves to messages which reinforce their preconceived ideas and they avoid messages which challenge their preconceptions. This selectivity in exposure, attention, perception, retention, and acceptance may serve as a barrier to effective communication. An individual having negative attitude towards family planning is unlikely to be attentive to a message relating to family planning no matter how nicely it is being presented.

**Inappropriate place:** The choice of place for communication may be a barrier to communication. The place selected may

not be convenient to the receiver. For example, a meeting arranged by the extension agent at a disputed place is unlikely to be attended by most of the people. Similarly an exhibition arranged at a place which is not easily approachable, is less likely to be visited by many people.

**Inappropriate arrangements:** Improper arrangements may make communication ineffective. For example, inadequate seating arrangements may make the lecture meeting ineffective. Lack of public address system may be a barrier to communication especially in large gatherings.

**Physical noise:** Physical noise refers to a situation when there are too many signals on the same channel at the same time. It is defined as any unplanned interference in the communication environment, which causes hindrances in the transmission of the message (Raman and Sharma, 2004). Too much disturbance serves as a barrier to effective communication. This aspect needs to be considered while deciding about the place for holding communication.

**Inability of receiver to respond as desired:** Sometimes the receiver may not be able to respond as desired by the source due to any reason. In this way the source fails to get the desired results of communication. A poor farmer with limited access to production inputs is less likely to respond to the advice given by the extension agent.

**Polarization:** The situation when a person fails to distinguish between true dichotomy and artificial one, can be regarded as polarization (Burgoon, 1974). A true dichotomy exists when there are only two options or alternatives to describe a situation. For example if a person is illiterate, he or she cannot at the same time be a literate. Similarly a person who is 40 years old cannot at the same time be 70. Likewise a person who is married, cannot at the same time be unmarried. Artificial dichotomy implies the existence of two alternatives, when in fact there may be many alternative between two polarized values. For example a person may be regarded as



satisfied or dissatisfied, happy or unhappy, competent or incompetent and so on. In fact, there are middle values in between the polarities which are being ignored or not being projected.

**Allness:** A person's knowledge of reality can never be totalled. The selectivity in communication implies that our knowledge of anything at any time can only be partial. For example if you narrate an incident which has been observed by you, to another person, he or she may not perceive it in the same way as you have observed. Thus the problem of allness may serve as a barrier to effective communication.