

Barriers to Communication and How to Overcome Them

By Alok Verma

Communication is the most basic framework on which any organization builds its formation. Looking at the other side the most important component of any relationship is also an effective communication. So this makes any barriers in communication the most critical thing to look at while we talk of personal and organizational growth. This becomes far more important for facilitation because our complete business relies upon the Facilitator's ability and skill to bring on the objective of the clients in the most natural way through various activities and challenges. And effective communications acts as the Fuel in the Engine.

Let's take a sneak peek into some of the obvious and some unobvious factors, which contribute to build these barriers in communication and also find out what can be done about them. As it is said that sometimes the distance between a message being passed and it being understood can much longer than we guess..

Noise & Distraction:

I would like to take this first, as I learned it the hard way. Distraction can be of many types, the environment, too cold, too hot, too sunny, too noisy, mosquitos & Flies etc. The distractions can easily rob away the natural listening skill of individuals. It is always good for the listener to either inform the speaker that there is something, which is annoying enough to concentrate. And for the Speaker to pause and address the distraction or noise, then carry on. As a message misunderstood is worse than a message not sent at all. I can easily recall my bitter experience with noise here, it was my 2nd Sales job and I was responsible to sell Laptops of Acer and Toshiba in Delhi and adjacent areas. One fine day I got an enquiry from a steel manufacturer who was looking for some Fujitsu tablets. Fujitsu was the only OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) selling tablets those days in India. The opportunity was tempting and I was already struggling with my sales target. Though we used to stick to our registered OEM, I took an extra step, liaison with Fujitsu guys and got a quote. Now this customer made a Purchase order and faxed it to us, unfortunately the fax landed on my CEO's Table. He was annoyed to see that I am again reinventing the wheel, which is something he already warned me to avoid. He picked up the phone and called me on my handheld cellphone. I was coming back from a sales call on my Motorbike. As I saw my CEO calling I found a place to stop by the road n picked the call. He was shouting at the top of his voice on phone. I guessed something was wrong but it was

too difficult to make out what he is saying actually. I was in the midst of a traffic jam in Delhi. I decided to say yes and ok after every sentence so that he may feel that I am listening, as I was too afraid to tell him that I cannot get anything but noise. So after some yelling he hung up the phone.

The next day was my last day in that job; I only came to know what actually happened from the HR person because I was still wondering why my CEO hung up the phone all of a sudden. He said, “**Do I assume you have no respect for me and the company policy??**” And guess what, I replied. “Yes Sir!!”

Distraction and noise can be very taxing at times, so it's always good to address them before we proceed.

Listening:

Listening is not just hearing the words said but a lot more. Words have context, which needs to be taken in. Words are said with feeling and meaning, with gestures and mannerisms, all of which need to be taken into account. In communication body language is very important, if not all-important. We do not just communicate with our words but with our whole body. Any listener (and speaker) who does not take this into account does so at their peril. Listening well is one of the best things we can do to overcome barriers in communication. Listening is giving our full attention to the other person. It helps to be enjoying the interchange. It helps to try to get the most out of the interplay.

So what is it that keeps people from listening and being present in a conversation? Here are some possible causes:

- **Rehearsing what to say next:** When we're too busy and too focused on preparing our response to what the other person is saying, we aren't being fully present to what's being said at precisely that moment.
- **Being overemotional:** Allowing defensiveness, fear, anger, love, disgust, or resentment to take control. Emotions are going to show up all the time, it's only when they overwhelm us that they become barriers to effective communication.
- **Wearing a Mask:** Pretending to be someone we are not. We go through life putting on masks to suit the needs of the moment. If we need to please someone, we put on our people pleaser mask. When we pretend that we are happy with everything other people are doing, we don't express anything that may be seen "not nice". When we don't express ourselves freely, we fail to communicate.
- **Having an agenda:** When we have a hidden agenda it's unlikely we'll be able to stay

focused on what the other person is saying. Most likely we'll be too busy thinking of how to convince them about something - or of ways to ask them for something, to be actually listening to what they're saying.

We may argue that most people have an agenda, and we'd be right about that. One of the main reasons we communicate is to get something we want, either through control, manipulation or just influence.

Having an agenda becomes a problem when we become too focused on fulfilling it; when we remain too attached to getting our way.

- **Prejudging and Filtering:** This consists of using our personal frame of reference to process any information we get. Our frame of reference consists of ideas, conclusions, experiences, preconceptions, values and beliefs that we have about life.

As an example, we disregard what someone is telling us because we dislike a trait about the person. We dismiss their input beforehand. In short we close the doors.

Another example, we reject or ignore someone's ideas because their values are different than ours. Now this is a very serious behavior pattern and if not addressed immediately, can lead to complete failure of communication.

Accent and Trust Factor:

This is universal and applicable to all of us. Americans think Asians have an accent and Asians think American and Europeans have one. Apparently there is no right and wrong, we all have our way of expressing the global language, 'English'. And most of the times our tone is influenced by the either the local dialect or our family language. When I came to Singapore this is the first thing I faced, I carry an Indian accent and my friends shared it with me. At the same time I used to feel that Singaporeans carry a unique accent as well. Some call it Singlish, now the question was that should I try to adapt the local accent to dissolve well or do something about the way I speak to be understood. As being a Facilitator, getting understood well is a very critical part of our job. So I was advised by a colleague to slow down my rate of speech. And this is something, which works for sure, and brings a lot of credibility as well.

Another important thing that comes with getting understood is the Trust. I still remember in my earlier programs in Singapore, sometimes clients used to give me a very Alien look. Which is a clear indicator of not being understood or finding my accent too thick. Another good instant I can recall is while conducting an activity called 'Trolley' where we need to pick balls scattered around in a field walking on wooden skies as a team. I had major difficulty in getting my message across while the activity was ongoing. Then later my co-facilitator pointed out that when people are tired, it becomes more difficult to get a fast pace accent. So being slow is the best bet, while at the same time we need to watch out for modulation to keep things exiting.

But since I am using the trick of saying it slowly, life gets much easier and moreover we get instant trust and acknowledgement from clients and colleagues.

Watch your Volume:

Volume and pitch is like Fire in Communication. While the right amount can cook the food, too much of it can burn the village. As I come from a family of Human Loudspeakers, saying is loud is pretty natural to us. This only comes handy when while doing a workshop the amplifier breaks down. But most of the times a loud voice is taken offensively by others. This is one area I personally work on constantly. Another interesting input I received from one of my co-facilitator is that if your pitch and volume is high, you may need to put some extra effort to command authority. This is sometimes needed in our profession, to get things done in a particular manner. While getting is too loud may rob the authority, too low and slow can also portray you as not interested and low in energy. So striking the right balance is the key for good communication.

Say it right:

Clarity of thoughts is essential for almost all kind of communications, be it written, visual or verbal. This brings respect and credibility to the speaker. As it is said, "Say it once and say it right" because as we repeat our own sentences it's interpreted that we are not sure of what we are saying. Another important factor from facilitation perspective is the use of 'filler words' like 'a', 'umm', 'well', 'you know', etc. While using them sometimes is acceptable, but too much of these words make you look nervous and unclear of your own thoughts. It may sound funny but rehearsing and simulating the real Workshop is a good idea for beginners. As these issues go away with more field time in Facilitation.

As we can see that communication barriers can take on many forms. Some we just need to be aware of in order to avoid them, others are things we need to steer more carefully around. Getting our communications right does take effort and a will to succeed. To get our message across may be the aim, with politeness, respect and civility our means, and clarity and meaning our tools, and words our vehicle. As we overcome each and every one of these barriers to effective communication, we'll be able to enjoy closer and more authentic relationships with others in our life. We'll connect with people in ways we hadn't anticipated. But more importantly, we'll feel at ease in practically any situation, confident that we'll be able to handle it.