

Effective Communication: Barriers and Strategies

While there are many subtleties to communication between people, some basic skills can help you to be a more effective communicator. Barriers and strategies associated with listening, checking your perceptions, and verbal communication are all useful to explore.

Barriers to Listening

- **Focusing on a personal agenda.** When we spend our listening time formulating our next response, we cannot be fully attentive to what the speaker is saying.
- **Hearing emotional noise.** We react emotionally to certain words, concepts and ideas, and to a myriad of other cues from speakers (appearance, non-verbal cues). Make a conscious effort to quiet your own emotional reactions so that you can listen properly.
- **Criticizing the speaker.** Do not be distracted by critical evaluations of the speaker. Focus on what they are saying - the message - rather than the messenger.
- **Understanding speech rate vs thought rate.** Speech rate (125 words per minute) is usually much slower than the rate at which we think (600-800 words per minute). You may need to focus on using that extra mental time to clarify and organize, in your mind, what the speaker is saying. Conversely, when the listener is communicating in a second language, it may be important for the speaker to slow down the rate of speech.
- **Experiencing information overload.** Too much stimulation or information can make it very difficult to listen with full attention. Try to focus on the relevant information, and the central points that are being conveyed.
- **Hearing external “noise”.** Audible noise may be extremely distracting. Some things can be minimized – e.g., turn down the ringer on your phone, and the email beep on the computer while meeting with someone. Other noises may be unavoidable – e.g., construction, other people. Also, there may be figurative “noise” from the external environment, such as distracting or inappropriate decor in a room, or environmental conditions (i.e., room is too hot or cold).
- **Experiencing physical difficulty.** Feeling physically unwell, or experiencing pain can make it very difficult to listen effectively. You may wish to communicate that this is not a good time, and reschedule the discussion. Otherwise, you may just need to concentrate even more on the task of listening.

Strategies for Effective Listening

- **Stop.** Focus on the other person, their thoughts and feelings. Consciously focus on quieting your own internal commentary, and step away from your own concerns to think about those of the speaker. Give your full attention to the speaker.
- **Look.** Pay attention to non-verbal messages, without letting yourself be distracted. Notice body language and non-verbal cues to allow for a richer understanding of the speaker’s point. However, avoid getting distracted from the verbal message.
- **Listen.** Listen for the essence of the speaker’s thoughts: details, major ideas and their meanings. Seek an overall understanding of what the speaker is trying to communicate, rather than reacting to the individual words or terms that they use to express themselves.
- **Be empathetic.** Imagine how you would feel in their circumstances. Be empathetic to the feelings of the speaker, while maintaining a calm centre within yourself. You need not be

drawn into all of their problems or issues, as long as you acknowledge what they are experiencing.

- **Ask questions.** Use questions to clarify your understanding, as well as to demonstrate interest in what is being said.

Barriers to Accurate Perception

- **Stereotyping and generalising.** Be careful not to hold on to preconceptions about people or things. We often have a tendency to see what we want to see, forming an impression from a small amount of information or one experience, and assuming that to be highly representative of the whole person or situation.
- **Not investing time.** Making assumptions and ignoring details or circumstances can lead to misconceptions. When we fail to look in-depth for causes or circumstances, we miss important details, and do not allow for the complexity of the situation.
- **Having a distorted focus.** Focusing on the negative aspects of a conversation or a situation is a habit common to many people. Even though we may recognize the positive things, we often give more weight to the negative (i.e., one negative comment overshadows numerous positive ones).
- **Assuming similar interpretations.** Not everyone will draw the same conclusions from a given situation or set of information. Everybody interprets things differently. Make sure to check for other people's interpretations, and be explicit about your own. People need not always think alike, but do not assume that they will. Similarly, do not assume that everyone shares your priorities. Explicitly identify relevant goals, values, and priorities when working with other people.
- **Experiencing incongruent cues.** Try to be consistent in the message that you send. If someone else is inconsistent, ask for clarification. As speakers, and as listeners, we are constantly, and simultaneously sending cues and receiving them from other people. Try to be consistent with your verbal cues and your body language. Do not say one thing and do another. Be aware of how your body language relates to your spoken words.

Strategies for Improved Perception

- **Analyse your own perceptions.** Question your perceptions, and think about how they are formed. Check in with others around you regularly, and be aware of assumptions that you are making. Seek additional information and observations. You may just need to ask people if your perceptions are accurate.
- **Observe carefully and attentively.** Look for detail, but keep the bigger picture in mind. For instance, it is important not to ignore or gloss-over the details of a situation or the subtle aspects of a person. However, it is important to see any one moment as part of a larger context. People have lives outside of work, for example, and any small part of a project ultimately is linked to a system much larger than itself.
- **Interpret consciously.** Recognize the meanings you attach to what you perceive, and know that not everyone will attach the same meanings to the same things or situations. Ask yourself why you associate those meanings with what you do.
- **Work on improving your perception.** Increase your awareness of barriers to perception, and which ones you tend towards. Check in with yourself regularly. Seek honest, constructive

feedback from others regarding their perceptions of you as a means of increasing your self-awareness.

- **Focus on others.** Develop your ability to focus on other people, and understand them better by trying to gather knowledge about them, listening to them actively, and imagining how you would feel in their situation.

Barriers to Effective Verbal Communication

- **Lacking clarity.** Different people may interpret the same words differently. Be as precise and clear as possible about your facts, *and* the interpretations and meanings you are deriving from them. Also, beware of abstract, overly-formal language, colloquialisms, and jargon, which obscure your message more than they serve to impress people.
- **Using stereotypes and generalizations.** A speaker who makes unqualified generalizations, or fails to recognize change (i.e., in the labels, categories, or terms they use) undermines their own clarity and credibility. Be careful not to get stuck in the habit of using stereotypes, or making generalizations about people, places or things. Where your goal is to communicate and connect with other people, biased language and general labels tend to create barriers. Another form of generalization is “polarization” or creating extremes. Try to be sensitive to the complexities of situations, rather than viewing the world simplistically (e.g., “I’m right; you’re wrong.” “They’re either with us or they’re against us.”)
- **Jumping to conclusions.** Confusing facts with inferences is a common tendency. Do not assume you know the reasons behind events, or that certain facts necessarily have certain implications. Make sure you have all the information you can get, and then speak clearly about the facts versus the meanings or interpretations you attach to those.
- **Using disconfirming responses.** There are a number of ways that we might respond to other people which have a negative effect on the communication between ourselves and others. Beware of:
 - failing to acknowledge attempts to communicate (giving no response at all)
 - interrupting
 - making an irrelevant response (not addressing what was just said)
- **Lacking Confidence.** A lack of confidence can be a major barrier to effective communication. Shyness, difficulty being assertive, or lack of self-worth can hinder your ability to make your needs and opinions known. Also, a lack of awareness of your own rights and opportunities in a given situation can prevent you from expressing your needs openly.

Strategies for Effective Communication

- **Focus on what you know.** Describe your own feelings rather than evaluating others. Express yourself in terms of information, observations, and specific issues, rather than making assumptions about other people or situations.
- **Focus on the issue, not the person.** Try not to take everything personally, and similarly, express your own needs and opinions in terms of the job at hand. Solve problems rather than attempt to control others. For example, rather than criticizing a co-worker's personality, express your concerns in terms of how to get the job done more smoothly in the future.
- **Be genuine rather than manipulative.** Be yourself, honestly and openly. Be honest with yourself, and focus on working well with the people around you, and acting with integrity.
- **Empathize rather than remain detached.** Although professional relationships entail some boundaries when it comes to interaction with colleagues, it is important to demonstrate sensitivity, and to really care about the people you work with. If you don't care about them, it will be difficult for them to care about you when it comes to working together.
- **Be flexible towards others.** Allow for other points of view, and be open to other ways of doing things. Diversity brings creativity and innovation.
- **Value yourself and your own experiences.** Be firm about your own rights and needs. Undervaluing yourself encourages others to undervalue you, too. Offer your ideas and expect to be treated well.
- **Present yourself as an equal rather than a superior.** Even when you are in a position of authority, focus on what you and the other person each have to offer and contribute to the job or issue.
- **Use confirming responses.** Respond to other in ways that acknowledge their experiences. Thank them for their input. Confirm their right to their feelings, even if you disagree. Ask questions, express positive feeling; and provide positive feedback when you can.
- **Be consistent between verbal and non-verbal cues.** Non-verbal cues tend to be more convincing than verbal messages. For example, if you are expressing a serious concern to someone, do not grin broadly while discussing it, or the listener may not know whether to take you seriously or not.

Adapted from Beebe et al. *Interpersonal Communication: Relating to Others* 2nd Canadian Edition. (Scarborough, Ontario: Allyn and Bacon, 2000). Some additional ideas have been added.