

you discover will help you use upward, downward, and lateral communication to your business advantage.

TEN BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

Finally, we consider specific obstacles to communicating in business. Volumes could be written on each of the obstacles treated briefly here. For our purposes, it is enough to recognize that the obstacles exist and to suggest a few ways to overcome them.

1. Physical Barriers

After we have given a substantial amount of work to a speech or business document, we have the inevitable tendency to feel that the world “owes” us polite attention. Not so. The members of our audience are under bombardment by several physical forces that can ruin our effort to communicate. Such physical barriers relate to time, to the audience’s physical environment and physical comfort and needs, and to the physical medium of communication.

Time, for example, puts pressure on each individual with whom we wish to communicate. For example, say that I have prepared a 20-page report. Do you (or others in my audience) have time to read so many pages? In the case of a speech, do you have time to hear me out?

Environmental conditions such as heat, cold, noise, and drafts can subvert communication. Environmental engineers working for major television studios find that they can control the mood of a studio audience by manipulating the thermostat. A chilly room will often lead to a hostile group; a warm room produces a lethargic, unresponsive audience.

In written documents, physical barriers include the amount of print bunched together on a page. Must the reader’s eye find its way through a page-long paragraph? Fuzzy or irregular type can cast an unprofessional look over a document, posing yet another physical barrier to conveying your message.

2. Cultural Barriers

An entire chapter in this text is devoted to the barriers that can exist between cultures. Recognize, however, that communication can also break down between subcultures and the dominant culture. For example, the Old Money Club may list among its members the industrial magnates of a particular region. How will they receive a financial presentation from a nonmember, perhaps a young upstart just out of business school? Learn to assess the cultural barriers that you must overcome to communicate with a social group to which you do not belong.

3. Experiential Barriers

Whenever we present new information to a group, we’re tempted simply to spill out the new information with the unspoken advice, “Trust me—I’ve been there.” Unfortunately, the members of our audience are seldom so willing or gullible. They have trouble believing what they have not seen for themselves. Therefore, whenever you plan to take

FIGURE 1-1 Perceptual Barriers

people on a mental journey beyond the limits of their own experience, relate your new material to something the audience has experienced. The astrophysicist Carl Sagan, for example, regularly won over nontechnical audiences by such descriptions as the “fried-egg” shape of our galaxy. We’ve seen a fried egg and can relate to Sagan’s communication.

4. Perceptual Barriers

Be aware that your audience may be filtering out major portions of your communication, as discussed earlier in this chapter. At the same time, recognize that individual audience members may be seeing other meanings than you intend. What, for example, do you see in Figure 1-1? Might another viewer just as certainly see something different in the same figure? (*Hint: if you saw a young woman with her head turned away from you, try to see the profile of an old beak-nosed woman—or vice versa.*)

In the same way, your audience may draw conclusions that you did not intend. Whenever possible, let another person preview a communication you want to send on its way to a larger group. Your reviewer can help you spot areas where unintended conclusions can be drawn by your eventual audience.

5. Motivational Barriers

Your audience may simply not want to be set into motion by your communication. Once they do begin to move with your thoughts, they may need help to keep going. This mental inertia is increasingly common among hassled businessmen and -women. “Just give me some peace and quiet!” they seem to plead by their postures and facial expressions. You can use many of the motivational devices suggested in this text (in the various writing and speaking chapters) to wake up and motivate an uninterested audience.

6. Emotional Barriers

Business situations rarely are able to entirely avoid the personal element. People’s feelings get hurt. On a more positive note, people also develop strong emotional attachments.

When you send messages to people with strong negative or positive emotions, you cannot expect the message to sail undisturbed through the heavy emotional weather. Often, your best alternative will be to face up to the presence of strong feelings early in the message—and then to proceed with communication. For example, a letter to a disgruntled client might well deal first with his or her anger:

You have expressed your disappointment with this company. I'm writing in an effort to mend fences with a client we respect and want to serve.

7. Organizational Barriers

Business practices, such as projects, are scheduled in distinct stages. Construction projects happen according to a carefully organized scenario of trades.

Be forewarned that your communication, no matter how well constructed, can fall flat if it is not synchronized with the organizational schedule in the minds of the audience. A typical example is an impassioned speech at a business meeting—a speech that earns only the reply, “That’s well and good, George, but we’re past that point.”

You can test the organizational timeliness of a communication with the *Need Test*: simply ask yourself, “Does my intended audience know they need the message I intend to bring them?” If the answer is “no,” you must first convince them that they need your message. If the answer is “yes,” design your messages to address as closely as possible the need they perceive.

8. Linguistic Barriers

This is not a compliment: “I didn’t understand much of what he said, but it was an excellent speech.” Effective communicators do not use vocabulary and sentence structures beyond the limits of their audiences. Language is neither a hammer with which to beat your audience nor a mirror in which to admire your own intelligence. Use words to create mental windows through which you and your audience can see your message clearly.

9. Nonverbal Barriers

As discussed in the text’s chapters on speaking skills, your nonverbal gestures can create serious barriers to be overcome by your words. Sagging posture can undo the effect of the most enthusiastic words, telling the audience “I don’t really feel or believe what I’m saying.” Lack of eye contact communicates embarrassment or insecurity over the words you are saying. These and other nonverbal signals are discussed in detail in other chapters.

10. Competition Barriers

Your audience seldom is “captive” to you alone. Members can choose other activities, some more exciting, perhaps, or less work than the communication activity you propose. Your long business letter, for example, may arrive in someone’s daily mail along with the monthly issue of a favorite magazine, a pressing bill, and several short business letters. No matter how persuasive your words, your letter may not even be opened for several days—because of competition for the reader’s attention.