

Barriers to Effective Communication

Part of our: Communication Skills library.

There are many reasons why interpersonal communications may fail. In many communications, the message (what is said) may not be received exactly the way the sender intended. It is, therefore, important that the communicator seeks feedback to check that their message is clearly understood.

The skills of Active Listening, Clarification and Reflection may help but the skilled communicator also needs to be aware of the barriers to effective communication and how to avoid or overcome them.

There are many **barriers to communication** and these may occur at any stage in the communication process. Barriers may lead to your message becoming distorted and you therefore risk wasting both time and/or money by causing confusion and misunderstanding. Effective communication involves overcoming these barriers and conveying a clear and concise message.

Common Barriers to Effective Communication:

The use of jargon. Over-complicated, unfamiliar and/or technical terms.

Emotional barriers and taboos. Some people may find it difficult to express their emotions and some topics may be completely 'off-limits' or taboo.

Lack of attention, interest, distractions, or irrelevance to the receiver. (See our page Barriers to Effective Listening for more information).

Differences in perception and viewpoint.

Physical disabilities such as hearing problems or speech difficulties.

Physical barriers to non-verbal communication. Not being able to see the non-verbal cues, gestures, posture and general body language can make communication less effective.

Language differences and the difficulty in understanding unfamiliar accents.

Expectations and prejudices which may lead to false assumptions or stereotyping. People

often hear what they expect to hear rather than what is actually said and jump to incorrect conclusions.

Cultural differences. The norms of social interaction vary greatly in different cultures, as do the way in which emotions are expressed. For example, the concept of personal space varies between cultures and between different social settings.

A skilled communicator must be aware of these barriers and try to reduce their impact by continually checking understanding and by offering appropriate feedback.

A Categorisation of Barriers to Communication

Language Barriers

Language and linguistic ability may act as a barrier to communication.

However, even when communicating in the same language, the terminology used in a message may act as a barrier if it is not fully understood by the receiver(s). For example, a message that includes a lot of specialist jargon and abbreviations will not be understood by a receiver who is not familiar with the terminology used.

Regional colloquialisms and expressions may be misinterpreted or even considered offensive. See our page: [**Effective Speaking**](#) for more information.

Psychological Barriers

The psychological state of the communicators will influence how the message is sent, received and perceived.

For example, if someone is stressed they may be preoccupied by personal concerns and not as receptive to the message as if they were not stressed.

Stress management is an important personal skill that affects our interpersonal relationships. See our pages [**Stress: Symptoms and Triggers**](#) and [**Avoiding Stress**](#) for more information.

Anger is another example of a psychological barrier to communication, when we are angry it is easy to say things that we may later regret and also to misinterpret what others are saying.

See our pages: [**What is Anger?**](#), [**Anger Management**](#) and [**Anger Management Therapy**](#) for more information.

More generally people with low self-esteem may be less assertive and therefore may not feel comfortable communicating - they may feel shy about saying how they really feel or read negative sub-texts into messages they hear.

Visit our pages on [Improving Self-Esteem](#) and [Assertiveness](#) for more information.

Physiological Barriers

Physiological barriers may result from the receiver's physical state.

For example, a receiver with reduced hearing may not grasp to entirety of a spoken conversation especially if there is significant background noise.

Physical Barriers

An example of a physical barrier to communication is geographic distance between the sender and receiver(s).

Communication is generally easier over shorter distances as more communication channels are available and less technology is required. Although modern technology often serves to reduce the impact of physical barriers, the advantages and disadvantages of each communication channel should be understood so that an appropriate channel can be used to overcome the physical barriers.

Systematic Barriers

Systematic barriers to communication may exist in structures and organisations where there are inefficient or inappropriate information systems and communication channels, or where there is a lack of understanding of the roles and responsibilities for communication. In such organisations, individuals may be unclear of their role in the communication process and therefore not know what is expected of them.

Attitudinal Barriers

Attitudinal barriers are behaviours or perceptions that prevent people from communicating effectively.

Attitudinal barriers to communication may result from personality conflicts, poor management, **resistance to change** or a **lack of motivation**. Effective receivers of messages should attempt to overcome their own attitudinal barriers to facilitate effective communication.

More Communication Skills:

[What is Communication?](#) | [Interpersonal Communication](#)

[Principles of Interpersonal Communication](#)

Try our:

[Interpersonal Skills Self-Assessment](#)

Other relevant pages: