


Communication Skills: Lecture No.3

Module 2

Lecture 2

Barriers to Communication: Overcoming Strategies

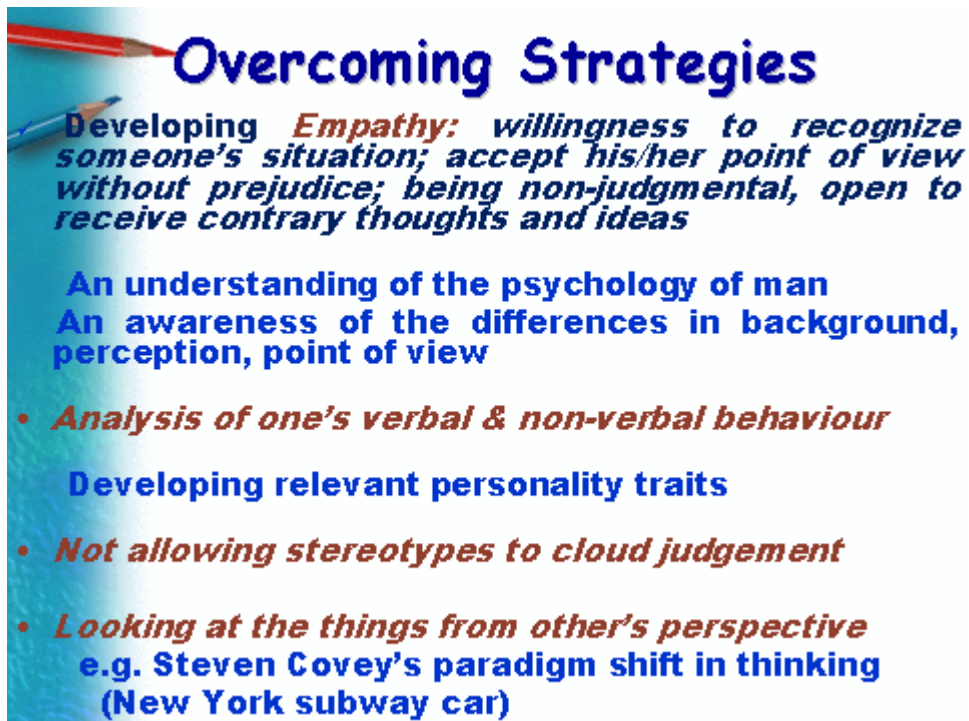
Welcome back to NPTEL's course on *Communication Skills*. In the previous lecture, you learnt about the barriers in interpersonal interactions. In this lecture we will focus on certain strategies to overcome these barriers.



- Things which are *obstacles* to effective communication.
- Such as: Lack of common code/language
Common frame of reference
- *Personality barriers-Psychological in nature*
- Difference in backgrounds/perspectives are overlooked
- Avoid stereotyping; jumping into conclusions
- Be open and flexible;
- Take note of *know-it-all* type of people

The foremost quality you need to develop for minimizing barriers in communication is *empathy*. Empathy is different from sympathy. If you see a beggar, who is shivering from

cold or starving without money to eat food, and you offer him a woolen blanket or give him some money, you feel *sympathy* for the beggar. However, empathy is not *feeling for*, but *feeling into*. It is the negative capability that poets like John Keats talked about, that is, your ability to understand the psychology of the other person by feeling *into* him/her. This means, taking great efforts to transcend your inner prejudice and narrow-minded world view in order to gain his/her perspective. When you empathize, you get into the shoes of the other person, and try to comprehend his/ her position. Instead of arguing with somebody to convince him/her your view point, you seek to understand why s/he is arguing in that manner, why s/he is feeling so negative, and why s/he is not able to understand your viewpoint. Developing empathy implies your willingness to recognize someone's situation. When everybody complains to you about a person's arrogant nature, if you empathize you may tell them: "We never know the situation that might have turned him arrogant; unless we understand that situation we will not be able to actually accuse him/her for being so". You first try to find out the root cause of such behavior and wish to help the individual to overcome it. Then you learn to accept his/her point of view without prejudice.



Overcoming Strategies

Developing *Empathy*: willingness to recognize someone's situation; accept his/her point of view without prejudice; being non-judgmental, open to receive contrary thoughts and ideas

**An understanding of the psychology of man
An awareness of the differences in background, perception, point of view**

- ***Analysis of one's verbal & non-verbal behaviour***

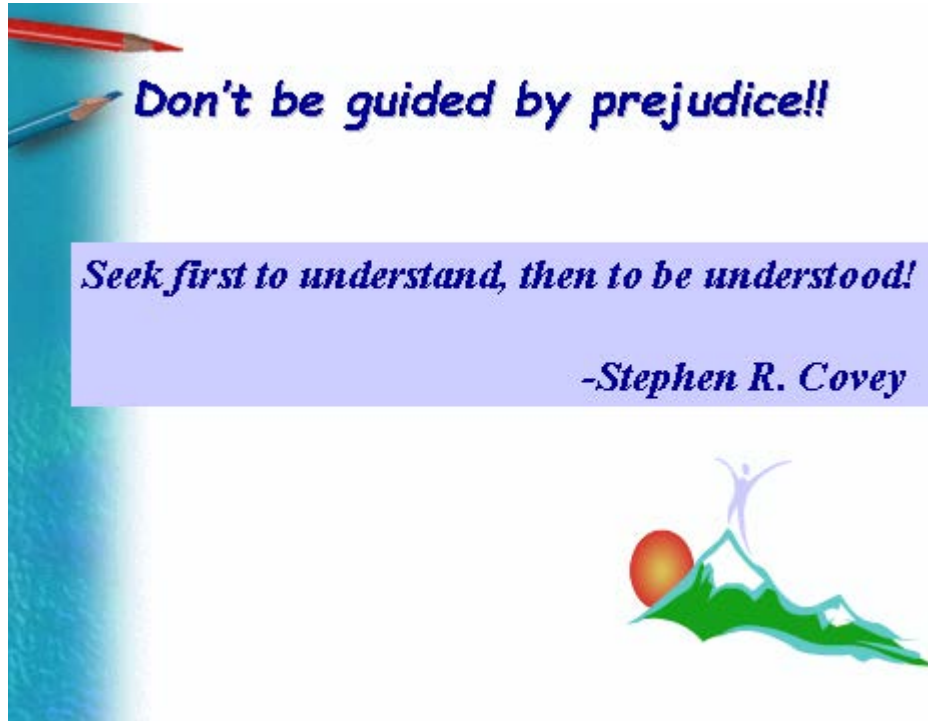
Developing relevant personality traits

- ***Not allowing stereotypes to cloud judgement***
- ***Looking at the things from other's perspective
e.g. Steven Covey's paradigm shift in thinking
(New York subway car)***

You are willing to listen to this person with open-mindedness. Remember what Robert Schuler said in this context: "The mind is like a parachute, it functions only when it opens!" Only when the mind is open, you are willing to listen to the other person, and

subsequently, contribute to a positive and fertile communication environment. If you start empathizing, you become non-judgmental, and are open to receive contrary thoughts and ideas. Soon, you develop an understanding of the psychology of a human being combined with an awareness of the differences in background, perception, and point of view.

Steven Covey, in his famous book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, discusses an interesting anecdote that contributed to a paradigm shift in his thinking and made him develop empathy. Covey was travelling on this New York subway car. The people in the car remained quiet as most of them were returning from their work. Some of them were tired and just dozing off. At a particular stop, a father boarded the bus with his three children—two girls and a boy. The father occupied the seat next to Covey and soon he was completely lost in his own thoughts. Meanwhile, the children grew restless and started moving here and there. They made a lot of noise, which annoyed the passengers. At one point, the children crossed a decent limit of disturbance, and it appeared that somebody might shout at them. Covey too felt disturbed, yet, before shouting at the father or his children, he thought he would first ask why the father remained indifferent to the unruly behavior of his children. While interacting with the father, Covey came to know that the young mother of these children died in an accident, and they were all returning from the funeral ground. The father had deliberately brought the children on the subway car because they enjoy travelling by it. He was at a loss because he did not know what to do when he would reach home. The moment Covey heard the incident, he too was struck by grief. He realized that the cause of seemingly indifferent attitude of the father was a personal tragedy that was so overwhelming that he was not able to think actively, or stop the children from causing disturbance because he was numbed by his own sorrow. Covey attributes this crucial experience to the paradigm shift that happened in his thinking. Based on this incident, he cautions his readers: “Don’t be guided by prejudice; seek first to understand, then to be understood.”



Developing empathy, removing prejudice, and willingness to seek first to understand the other person, are traits that you should imbibe to become a very effective communicator.

Now, to continue with the thought of using empathy, look at the quote from the famous poet and philosopher, **Kahlil Gibran**:



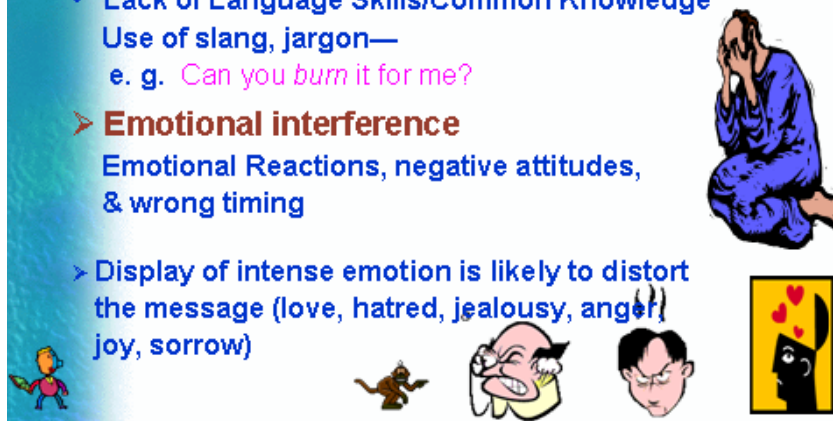
For Gibran, wisdom without empathy is of no use. Mere accumulation of wisdom, possession of philosophy would make one a moron. Life is complete only if a person is able to emote himself/herself and relate to others with sensitivity.

Apart from developing empathy, in order to eliminate barriers in communication, we need to analyze the sender's verbal as well as *non-verbal* behavior. Later in this series of lectures, we have an entire module on *non-verbal communication* in which we are going to discuss how the inner most emotional thoughts of human beings are revealed through non-verbal behavior. Right now, understand that observing the non-verbal behavior of the person will help you to import real meaning of verbal communication. Moreover, you need to develop certain essential non-verbal attributes in yourself to maintain rapport with the person to whom you wish to communicate. Try to mirror the partner's gestures to gain trust and likeability. While seated, sit slightly leaning towards that person to show interest. Nod occasionally to reveal that you are following the conversation. Maintain eye-contact while interacting and keep your palms open—this will signify that you are honest and genuine. The overall aim is to keep the other person at a comfortable level when the person is interacting with you. While implementing these strategies, you should keep in mind that you should not allow stereotypes to cloud your judgment. Look at the person as a unique human being. Separate him/her from any distractive background notions that emanate from religion, nationality, culture, custom, clothes, food-habits—focus on the message.

Let us identify some barriers with regard to interpersonal transactions. As discussed before, a major barrier in interpersonal communication is limited frame of reference.

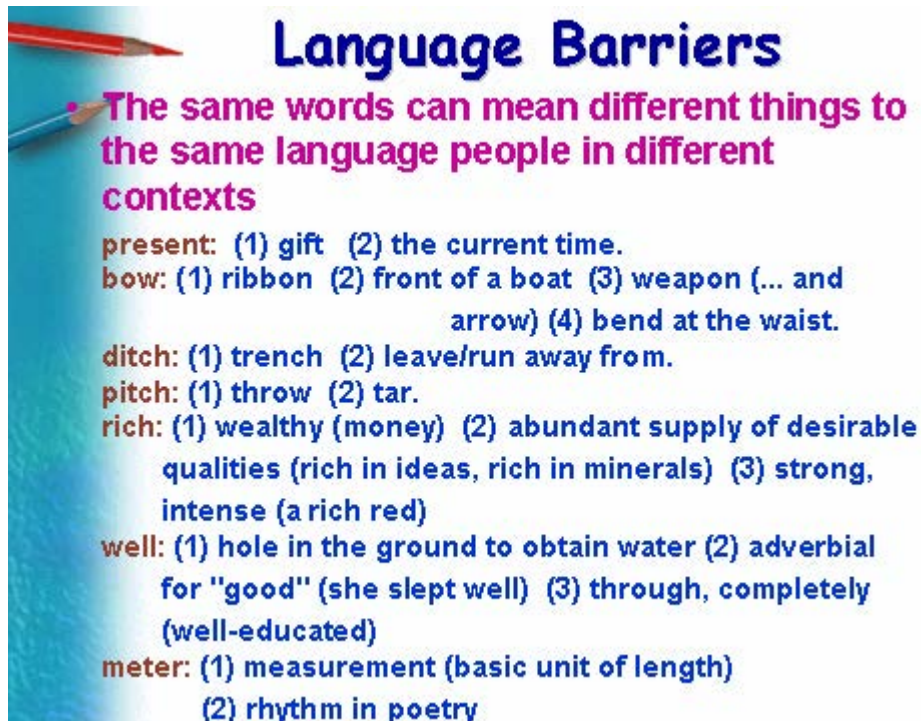
2 Barriers to Interpersonal Transactions ...

- **Limited frame of reference**
 - Lack of Language Skills/Common Knowledge
 - Use of slang, jargon—
 - e. g. *Can you burn it for me?*
- **Emotional interference**
 - Emotional Reactions, negative attitudes, & wrong timing
- Display of intense emotion is likely to distort the message (love, hatred, jealousy, anger, joy, sorrow)



Limited frame of reference, in business communication, implies lack of appropriate language skills such as ignorance of the office parlance. If somebody is working in an office environment, he/she will be in trouble without knowing the jargons and slangs. This incident happened in the case of a newly appointed secretary, who, in order to impress her boss, pestered him for some work. The boss took an old document and asked her: "Can you burn it for me?" She said, "Yes, of course", and eagerly took the papers. Since she did not return for more than an hour, the boss realized that something went wrong. He summoned for her and enquired: "Have you burnt it?" She said, "Yes sir." The surprised boss asked: "Then, where is the copy, and the original?" She got scared because she could not understand what he was asking. The word, *burn*, as it is used in the *burning* of CDs/DVDs, means *copying*. In office parlance, it refers to photocopying. While, the boss just wanted her to photocopy a two hundred year old document, the secretary went and literally *burnt* the document and threw the ashes in trash can. She not only lost her job on the very first day but also paid a huge amount as compensation. It is significant to note here that the irreparable damage was caused due to limited frame of reference. Either the boss should have double-checked his secretary's understanding of *burning* or the secretary should have sought clarification. So, for effective communication to happen without any barriers, the sender as well the receiver should play responsible roles. The sender should ensure that he/she is clear in sending the message, while, the receiver should take efforts to understand the import of the message. If the receiver is not sure about the received message, he/she should not hesitate to seek clarifications.


Look at the following examples to understand how language barriers occur:



Language Barriers

- **The same words can mean different things to the same language people in different contexts**
- present:** (1) gift (2) the current time.
- bow:** (1) ribbon (2) front of a boat (3) weapon (... and arrow) (4) bend at the waist.
- ditch:** (1) trench (2) leave/run away from.
- pitch:** (1) throw (2) tar.
- rich:** (1) wealthy (money) (2) abundant supply of desirable qualities (rich in ideas, rich in minerals) (3) strong, intense (a rich red)
- well:** (1) hole in the ground to obtain water (2) adverbial for "good" (she slept well) (3) through, completely (well-educated)
- meter:** (1) measurement (basic unit of length) (2) rhythm in poetry

A word can mean different things in different contexts to the same set of people



Words with two meanings

- After taking a shot with his bow, the archer took a bow.
- No one could believe how much produce our garden could produce.
- There's no dessert in the desert for those who desert.
- The family was hoping their live plants would live.
- They were going to project the project at the local theatre.
- It's not easy to resume work without a resume.
- The band booked the studio to record their record.
- The dog was standing so close it was impossible to close the door.
- The incense incensed the customers.



Same letters, different pronunciation/meaning

- The bandage was *wound* around the *wound*.
- We must *polish* the *Polish* furniture.
- Since there is no time like the *present*, he thought it was time to *present* the *present*.
- I did not *object* to the *object*.
- The insurance was *invalid* for the *invalid*.
- There was a *row* among the oarsmen about how to *row*.
- Upon seeing the *tear* in the painting I shed a *tear*.
- I spent last *evening* *evening* out a pile of dirt.

Same spelling but different pronunciation and meaning




Language Barriers

- The same words can mean different things in different cultural contexts to different language speaking people
- E.g. **Coca-Cola** in China was introduced as **Ke-kou-ke-la**. In Chinese it means "**bite the wax tadpole**" or "**female horse stuffed with wax**" depending on the dialect. Later—changed to: "**ko-kou-ko-le**," "**happiness in the mouth.**"

The same words can mean different in different contexts for people speaking different languages

The meaning often gets distorted in translation:



Lost in Translation!

- Often the real meaning is lost in translation!
- E.G.: General Motors introduction of the **Chevy Nova** in South America
- It was not selling any cars until it found out that "no va" means "it won't go."
- Renamed the car in its Spanish markets to the **Caribe**. [cah-ree'-bay]

E.g.

Take note of the strategies to overcome some barriers suggested below:



Overcoming Strategies

- When you use an ambiguous/polysemous word, **make the context very clear**
- Try to **understand any cultural variation in pronunciation** that might cause miscommunication
- While speaking, **correlate your intentions with positive non-verbal gestures**
- **Seek the help of a translator, native speaker as and when required**

Another barrier that can come in between in interpersonal transactions is the interference caused by emotion. The emotional reactions, particularly negative attitudes, and use of wrong timing can all play havoc in human communication. Display of intense emotion is likely to distort the message, which can be in the form of love, hate, jealousy, anger, joy, agony, and sorrow.



2. Emotional Barriers

- Hidden/open emotional gestures are culturally given
- But– negative emotions act as barriers
- Fear, apprehension, misgiving
- Anger, bitterness, hatred, jealousy
- Suspicion, disbelief, distrust
- Anxiety, low self-esteem, distress, stress
- Fatigue, ill-health, pain, disability

How to combat with emotional barriers? Generally, when you talk about emotions, you should be as expressive as possible in terms of using gestures and facial expressions. Most of the hidden/open emotional gestures are culturally given. Cultures teach the community implicitly (e.g. *don't point fingers at others, suggest changing this as this is gender stereotype, etc.*) as well as explicitly (*say Namaste, shake hands, etc.*). Thus, the degree in which you express your emotions is culturally given to you, but how you express it, and how you make those emotions effective in your communication, is something that you should learn at your own level. Moreover, positive emotions like expressing kindness, feeling charitable, feeling sympathy, do not interfere as much as negative emotions like showing anger, controlling frustration and concealing hatred.




2. Barriers to Interpersonal Transactions ...



- **Emotional interference...**
- Negative emotions interfere more than positive ones
- *Attitude* (threatening/domineering) makes the receiver defensive.
- He is likely to misinterpret, ignore or overreact to the messages



In order to maintain win-win situation in interpersonal communication, Dale Carnegie advises to all communication free from arguments. He says that in whichever way one might argue, it always ends in negative feelings.



Why should you avoid arguments?

- Dale Carnegie:
"Why prove to a man he is wrong? Is that going to make him like you? Why not let him save face? He didn't ask for your opinion. He didn't want it. Why argue with him? You can't win an argument, because if you lose, you lose it; and if you win it, you lose it. Why? You will feel fine. But what about him? You have made him feel inferior, you hurt his pride, insult his intelligence, his judgment, and his self-respect, and he'll resent your triumph. That will make him strike back, but it will never make him want to change his mind. A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still."

Let us look at some strategies to overcome emotional barriers.

If somebody speaks to you in an angry tone, you should immediately lower your voice and maintain calmness. This will immediately compel the person to reduce his voice and tone. Conversely, if you raise your voice, it will escalate the argument and it will get spiced-up with mutual ill-will.

Similarly, as a sender, you should always show concern, gain trust, and establish credibility in the eyes of the receiver. This can be done through your consistent and predictable behavior. If you are in a higher position, and you wish to introduce a new system in your office, you need to remove the fear of change among your sub-ordinates through education and familiarization. If they are afraid about automation through computer, you should first educate them by sending them to crash-courses where they can develop some basic skills for using computers. Similarly, if you approach your boss for some favour, you should select the best psychological moment to do so. For instance, it is the time when s/he appreciates you for a piece of work done in an excellent manner, you should remind him/her about the leave you had applied for or about your pending increment.

TECHNOLOGICAL BARRIERS

Today, interestingly, the technological devices of communication such as mobile phone and computer, which are meant for saving our time, actually consume more time and act as barriers to human interaction!



Below are some suggestions for overcoming technological barriers:



Overcoming strategies

- Use technological aids for communication to the minimum.
- Use appropriate media (**spoken, written, non-verbal**) and channel (**face-to-face, one-to-one, one to group, telephone, radio, tv, letters, e-mail, sms**)
- If you can use face-to-face communication, do not send SMS
- Avoid overuse (sending too many/long e-mails; long phone calls)

Overcoming technological barriers



Overcoming strategies

- Ask questions, seek clarifications (never presume your communication meaning is easily understood)
- Be clear and precise about your message; use repetition; summarize; paraphrase; ask somebody to summarize
- Listen carefully & patiently; don't interrupt even if somebody criticizes you
- Reflect back on criticism, make the critic feel understood.

Overcoming technological barriers contd...

Never presume your message is easily understood!

- In terms of non-verbal communication/body language, even the use of accessories can become physical and psychological barriers. Hence, before you think of using some accessories, ask yourself: *Do accessories enhance the effectiveness of communication or act as barriers?* Barriers can easily occur owing to any of these accessories: **Clothing, body perfume, grooming, watch, bracelet, ear rings, nose-ring, necklace, make-up, dying of hair, moustache-type, hair-style type, belt, hand-bag, footwear: shoes, slippers; high-heels.**
- An accessory can also be used to enhance communication rapport. For example, the use of high-heels by females help maintaining eye-contact easily. They do not have to look up to the male bosses! However, a diamond studded high-heels can act as a distracter and cause barrier in human interaction.

What will happen if you do not bother to remove barriers in your communication? Indifference to barriers can cause *miscommunication*. We will discuss more about miscommunication with suitable examples in the next lecture. Meanwhile, go through the following books for enriching your knowledge about communication skills in general, and overcoming barriers in particular.

REFERENCE



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