

Communication Skills: Lecture No.2

Module 2

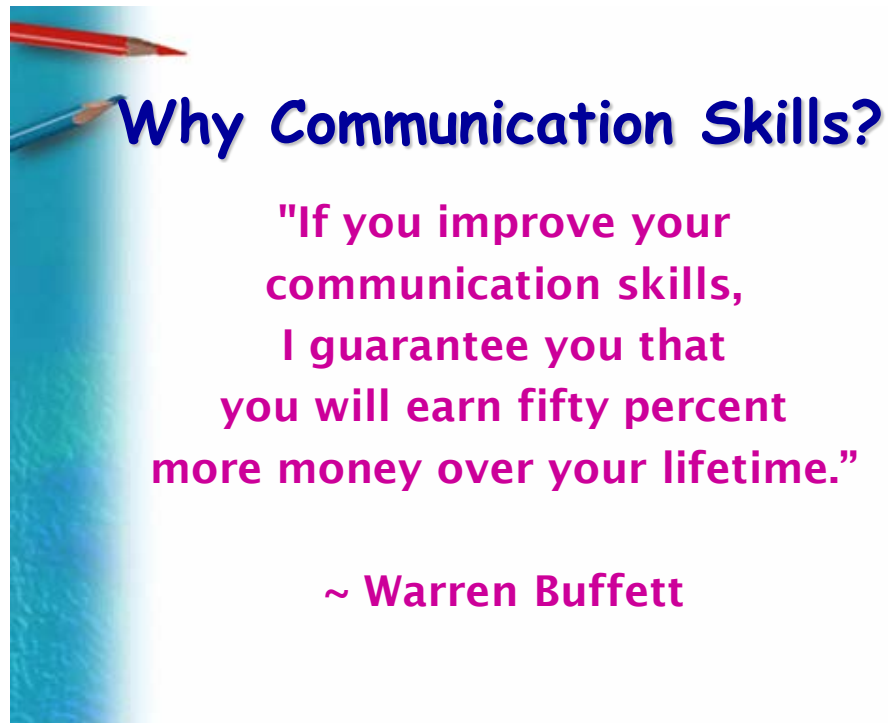
Lecture 1

Barriers to Communication



Welcome back to NPTEL's course on communication skills! In the first introductory module and the very first lecture we looked at the introductory aspects of communication skills. We looked at the need for communication; more specifically, we looked at the need for effective communication. We discussed the modalities of communication and strategies to make our communication very effective. We also observed that there are some barriers which will actually prevent you to make your communication very effective. In this module, **Module II: Lecture 1**, we will focus on *the Barriers to Communication*. Before I start talking to you about the Barriers to Communication, once again let us recall, why communication skills are very important.

I would like to recall why it is very important from a famous statement made by one of the shrewdest investors of the world that is, Warren Buffet. He says, “If you improve your communication skills, I guarantee you that you will earn fifty percent more money over your lifetime.”



What he says is that communication skills will fetch you fifty percent more income. That is, if your regular income is Rs.10,000, with effective communication skills the income can go up to Rs.15,000. Look at a statement from Emerson which focuses on another very significant aspect of communication. The quote from Emerson is this, he says, “Thought is the blossom, Thought is the blossom, language the bud; action the fruit behind it.”



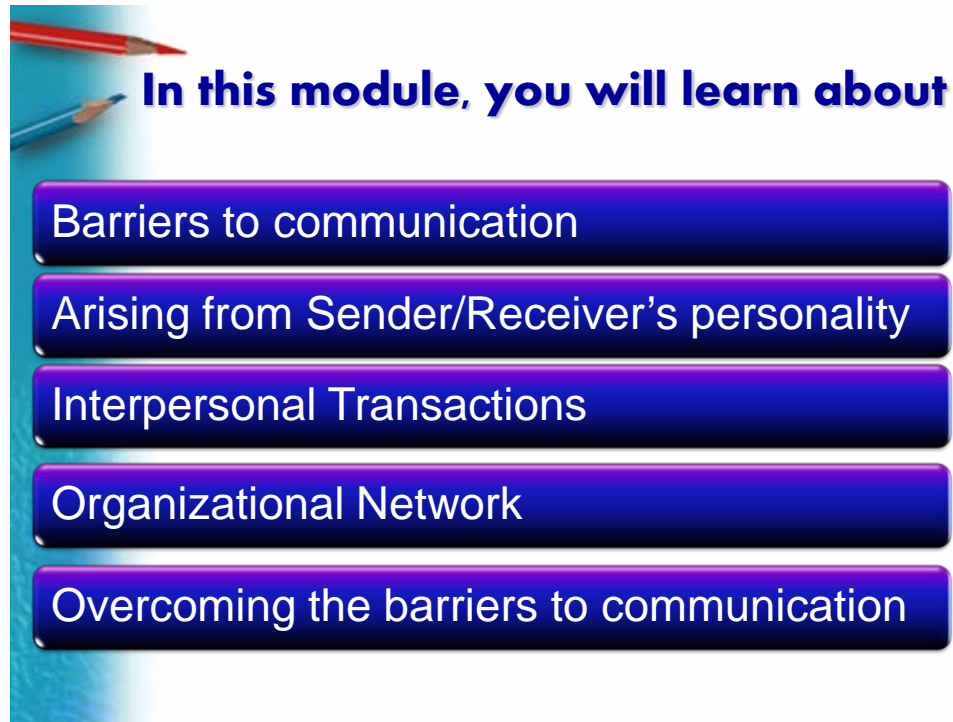
Communication: Action/Reaction Interaction/Transaction

**“Thought is the blossom;
language the bud;
action the fruit behind it.”**

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

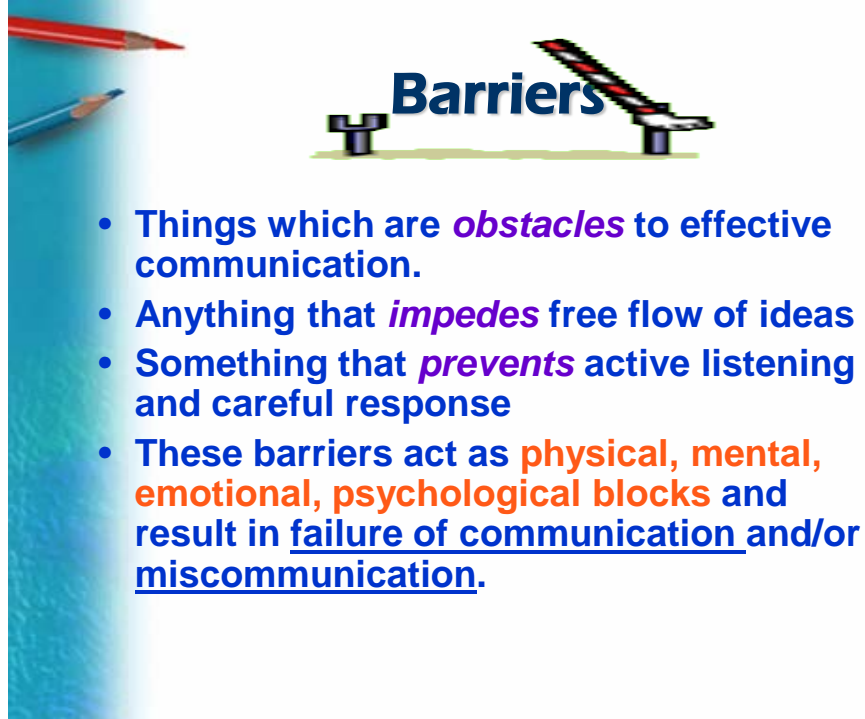
***But communication process is not
as natural as a leaf to a tree!***

Now, I would like to read action here as communication, because communication means action, reaction, interaction, and transaction. Apply what Emerson says to make your communication effective. If the thought blossoms well, you get the fruit out of it. Only if the thought is clear, then the communication is effective. But in between, there is this process of action, reaction, and then there is interaction and transaction. Unlike what Emerson says, communication process is not that easy and it is not as natural as a leaf to a tree! It will not that spontaneously happening, the flow will not be that easy. Why? Because there will be some kind of barriers and that is the focus of this lecture.



Basically we are going to focus on three kinds of barriers: (i) barriers which arise from the sender and the receiver's personality; (ii) barriers related to interpersonal transactions; and (iii) barriers related to organizational network.

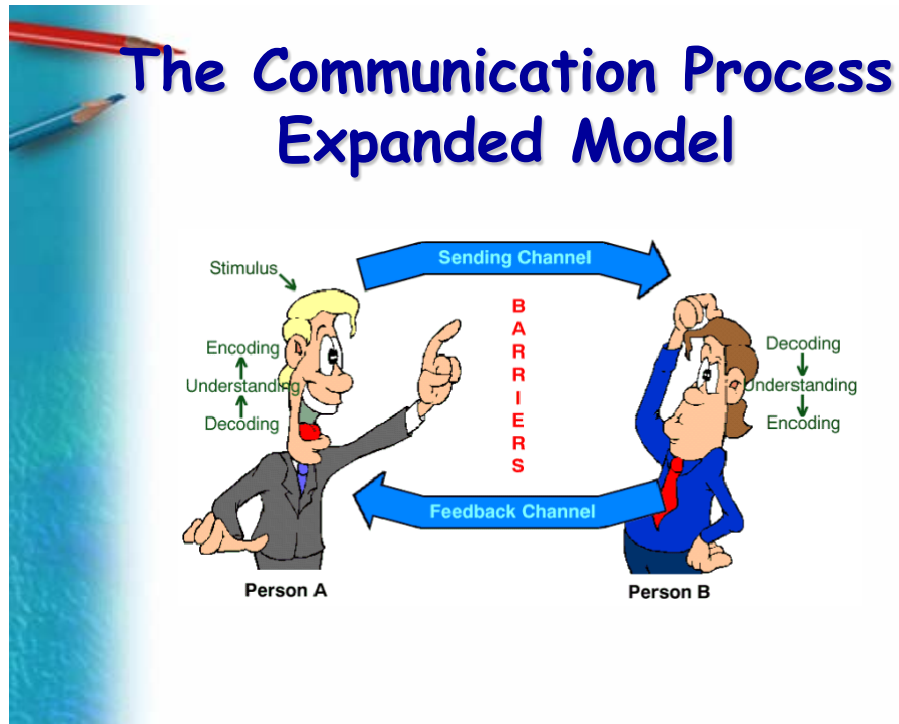
What are barriers anything that prevents your natural ability to express and convey your ideas easily? How do we define barriers? Barriers are things that physically block you, and put obstacles to effective communication. In an intellectual sense, barriers are things which cause disturbance—anything that impedes free flow of ideas, or



The graphic features the word "Barriers" in a large, bold, blue font. To the left of the word is a vertical blue bar with a gradient. Above the word, there are two pencils (one red, one blue) and a small illustration of a barrier with a red and white striped flag. Below the word, there is a list of four bullet points in blue text, with some words in purple and orange.

- Things which are **obstacles** to effective communication.
- Anything that **impedes** free flow of ideas
- Something that **prevents** active listening and careful response
- These barriers act as **physical, mental, emotional, psychological blocks** and result in failure of communication and/or miscommunication.

Barriers thwart active listening and careful response. They do not let the receiver pay complete attention to the message. Owing to barriers in communication, you cannot concentrate on what is being told to you, or you may fail to receive the message hundred percent. These barriers act at physical, mental, emotional, and psychological levels. They contribute to failure of communication, or, cause miscommunication. In the next lecture, we will be looking at more examples of miscommunication. Right now we will focus on barriers and learn how they can cause failure in communication. Once again let me recall the communication process—expanded model, which I discussed in the first lecture.



If you look at the above model, there are two persons, person A and person B. Person A is the sender who sends the message through the channel, and person B is the one who receives the message through the channel. However, you can see that in between there are barriers that distort the message. These barriers normally come under three categories.



The first one can be categorized under those barriers which arise actually from sender and receiver's personality. Mostly these are psychological, personality related and perception oriented ones. The second type of barriers come under interpersonal transactions. And thirdly, the major barrier in communication today takes place in organizational network. Let us try to understand these three categories with suitable illustrations.

In the first category, the sender and the receiver need to have a common frame of reference to encode/decode the message correctly. Look at a simple example; what would you infer from this kind of message sent as an SMS from a mobile phone to another one: *short circuit at office, please send an electrician*. The message can mean different things according to varying contexts and frames of references. Normally, it would convey a simple message in a context where the manager informs one of his subordinates that there is a short circuit, and he should send an electrician for repair. But, it need not be electrician as such; short circuit need not actually refer to the electrical short circuit, especially in the context of a spy's story. Thus, if James Bond sends this message to his boss M, *short circuit at office* could mean *my partner is kidnapped*, it could also mean, *my assistant is killed, send someone for my help*. In this context, Bond is actually requesting for *a substitute, an assistant*, to replace the one who got killed. The person who knows the common frame of reference, in this case, his boss M, will be able to encode/decode smoothly and the barrier will not happen. But if somebody out of the common frame of reference misses the right code then encoding/decoding cannot happen properly.

Let us look at another interesting example of miscommunication due to lack of a common frame of reference between the sender and the receiver. Interestingly, in this case, both the communicators used English language, and both are native speakers, yet misunderstanding took place. How? When the sender is not clear about her/his objective, or makes inappropriate use of language, the message will be ambiguous. This is about the real incident of an American tourist who missed a flight just because of a communication gap. She is a housewife who returned to America after a long tour of foreign countries. She looked fashionable with gaudy dress, costly necklace, earrings, and diamond-studded bracelets. She carried lot of baggage along with her. The customs officer just asked her about her occupation, to which, she replied "**none**." However, the customs officer stopped her for further checking. After checking her belongings, and frisking her thoroughly, for more than one hour, he said: "Okay fine, mam, you can go." But the lady became furious because she missed her connecting flight due to the delay they caused in checking her baggage. She shouted: "Officer, what is this? Is it your way of having some fun? Is it your way of harassing people by random checking?" And then the officer replied: "Mam, it is not like that!" "I had to stop you because when I asked you about your occupation and you said, you are a **nun**!" Actually, the lady didn't want to say that

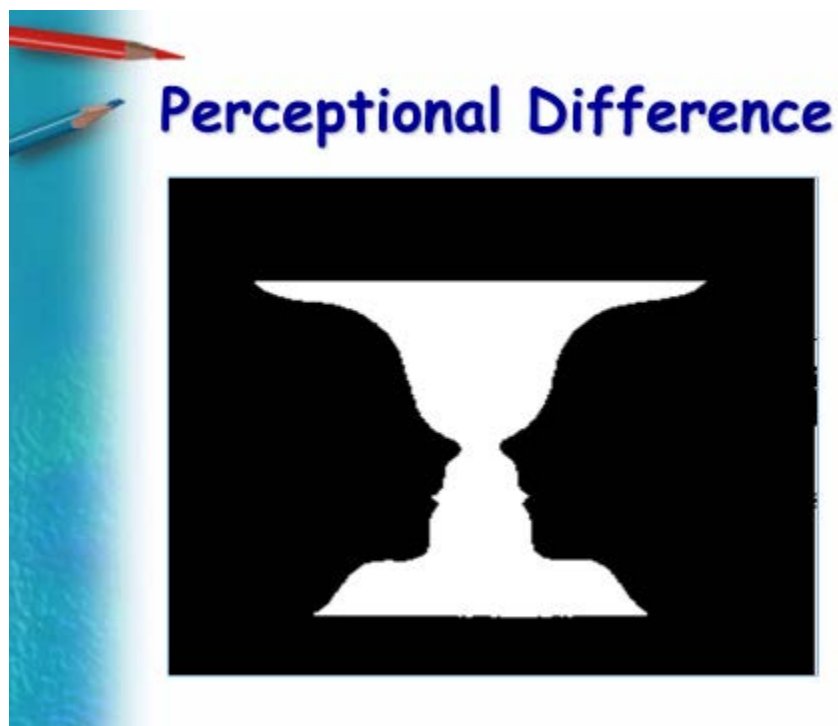
she is just a house wife, instead, she said “none.” But the officer thought her to be a “nun,” and wondered if she were a nun why should she carrying expensive things with her. This confusion caused due to the difference in meaning, though both words are pronounced in the same manner, compelled the officer to make the lady undergo a thorough check of all her belongings! In this case, both of them happen to be native speakers of English, but the problem happened because the sender did not bother to tell the other person clearly what she meant when she said “none”, and the receiver took it for granted that she is a “nun.” But this is an illustration to tell you that in spite of the fact you speak the language correctly, communication mistakes can happen, if you lack common frame of reference.

I am going to give you another example where the receiver is unable to understand and interpret the message properly. This is an interesting example from a classroom situation where the teacher happens to give a message, and then one of the students could not get the message correctly. The teacher wanted to demonstrate that drinking arrack, or any kind of alcoholic drinks, will be harmful to their health. In order to illustrate this, he went to the class with a bottle of arrack, and a transparent container full of earthworms. He took the bottle and asked the students: “Do you see what is there in this bottle?” The students replied: “Yes, Sir, we can see that it contains arrack.” Then he showed the container and asked: “Now, what do you see in this container?” They said, “Sir we could see earthworms”, “So are they alive or dead?” . . . “They are alive sir, they are fully alive so we could see them moving” . . . “Now see what happens . . .” He picked one earthworm after another, and dropped it one by one in the bottle. As soon as the earthworm touched the arrack, it started wriggling very fast, moved here and there and then it became flat, and slowly it settled down, and died. The teacher asked anyone who had understood the message clearly to share it with the class. A very enthusiastic student got up and said: “Sir, you had brought arrack and then you put these earthworms in it. All the worms died. So the message is that if you drink arrack or liquor, it will kill all the worms in your stomach, so sir”, he continued, “we should be drinking arrack, every time we take food, we should be drinking some kind of liquor, every time we have some trouble in stomach, so that it will go inside and kill all the worms in the stomach.” The teacher was very bewildered; he actually wanted to convey the following message: “Look, if you take arrack, it will affect your digestive system, and it will eventually kill you; hence, you should avoid taking alcoholic drinks.” But the student took the opposite message! He thought that, “. . . probably the teacher is telling us to take this regularly to keep the digestive system purified.” Now what happened here? The sender went with the best of the intentions, the receiver was very attentive and watched the entire demonstration keenly. But he was not able to understand, interpret, and make correct inferences. The problem here is related to the personality. That is, the message got distorted to the limited knowledge, poor background, and incorrect perspective of the student.

Overall when we talk about personality barriers, understand that mostly they are psychological in nature. What do people do? People tend to take for granted “the commonality” in communication. Remember, communication has come from *communis*, which means common. This commonality implies that you and I have mutual interest. I want to give you something and you want to take something from me, in the form of ideas, thoughts, and messages. Yet, some people take this mutuality, commonness for granted, and they overlook the difference in backgrounds causing communication gaps.

The perceptual difference occurs owing to the standpoint that we take. The classic example is shared from Bronislaw Malinowski, a very famous anthropologist, and ethnographer, who interviewed the cannibals for his research during the Second World War. Once an old cannibal was curious to ask him a question. He wanted to know how the Europeans managed to eat the quantities of human flesh produced by massive killings. He was taken aback when Malinowski replied that Europeans never ate the flesh of the enemy they killed. To this, a very shocked and surprised response came from the cannibal. He asked in horror, “What kind of barbarians are you to kill people without any real object?” The civilized beings think that the cannibals are brutes, and the cannibals think that the civilized ones are barbarians who kill people but do not eat the flesh of the people whom they kill!

Now, look at the next two pictures quickly, and tell me what comes to your mind first.

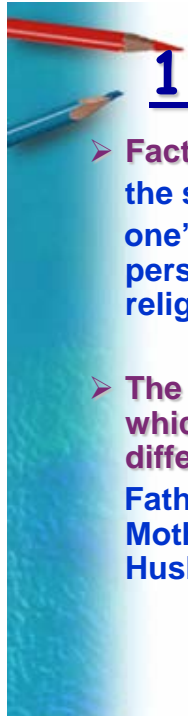


Do you see the white vase or a wine cup? Or, do you see the dark faces, may be a young couple who are about to kiss each other?

How do you call it, when a cup is filled with water partially?



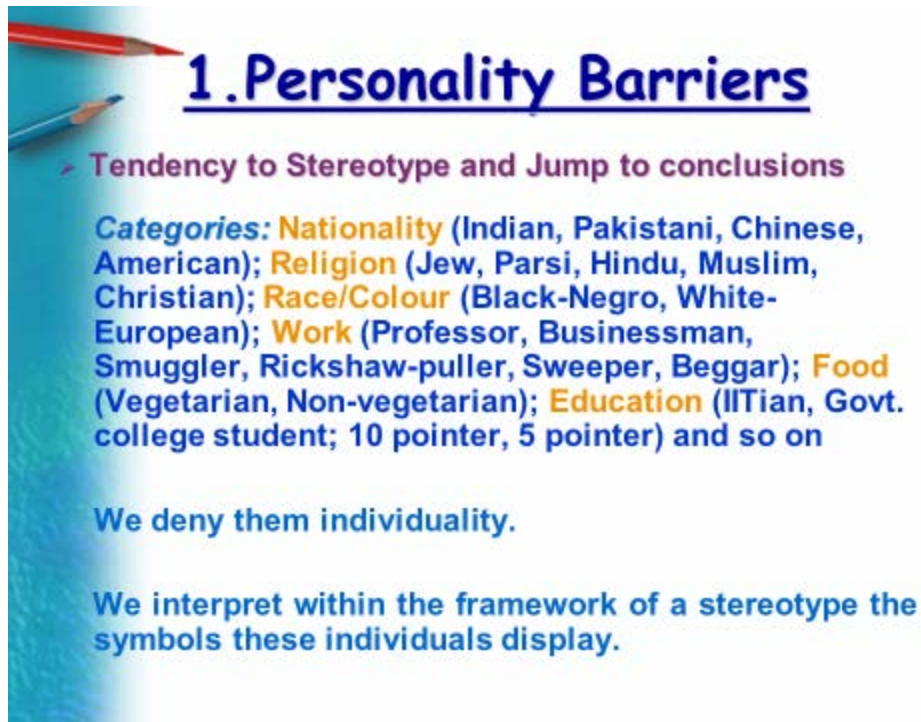
Psychologists say that if you say that this is half empty, you are a pessimist, and if you say that this is half full, then you are an optimist. The optimist always looks for something that is positive and the pessimist always looks for something that is negative. What strikes you first is not what your eyes view but what your mind perceives intellectually. A major factor that contributes to one's perspective is the socio-cultural milieu one is surrounded with. It gives a perspective right from the birth. It gets conditioned by the parents, the neighbors, the school, the church, the railway station, the bus-stop, the songs and the movies. One's interpersonal experiences with the socio-cultural set-up determines one's temperament such as introvert/extrovert, soft-spoken, hot blooded, cold blooded, calm, pleasing, affable, unapproachable, etc.



1. Personality Barriers ...

- **Factors that contribute to one's perspective:**
the socio-cultural milieu one has grown up in, one's interpersonal experiences, temperament, personality, ideas and values, position in life, religious and political beliefs, etc. . .
- **The position we hold gives us a certain perspective which makes it difficult to understand others with different outlook.**
Father/Son, Teacher/Student, Senior/Junior, Mother-in-law/Daughter-in-law, Manager/Worker, Husband/Wife, etc...

And the person's ideas and values, roles and positions, contribute to various perspectives. Even the religious and political beliefs can cloud one's perspective. The position we hold gives us a certain perspective which makes it difficult to understand others with different outlook. The positions taken by people at different stages of their lives as father/son, teacher/student make them behave and understand in different manner. Even among students, take for instance, the difference in position between seniors and juniors. As juniors, they do not like ragging. But as seniors, they consider ragging as unavoidable and justify it. Similarly, the son, when he becomes the father, changes his perspective. And the student, when (s) he takes the position of a teacher, alters his/her perspective. In like manner, a daughter-in-law, when she matures as a mother-in-law behaves differently and may start ill-treating her daughter-in-law. There is also this tendency to stereotype people and jump to conclusions about their qualities and characteristic features.



1. Personality Barriers

➤ Tendency to Stereotype and Jump to conclusions

Categories: **Nationality** (Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, American); **Religion** (Jew, Parsi, Hindu, Muslim, Christian); **Race/Colour** (Black-Negro, White-European); **Work** (Professor, Businessman, Smuggler, Rickshaw-puller, Sweeper, Beggar); **Food** (Vegetarian, Non-vegetarian); **Education** (IITian, Govt. college student; 10 pointer, 5 pointer) and so on

We deny them individuality.

We interpret within the framework of a stereotype the symbols these individuals display.

For example, if you happen to read Shakespeare's portrayal of the character of Shylock as a Jew in *The Merchant of Venice*, you tend to look at any Jew as a shrewd, mean, and cold-hearted person. Stereotypes are also formed owing to the nationality. Thus, when you say, *Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, American, European*, you also tend to give certain attributes. Depending on the political affinity, you see certain country and their countrymen as your friends or as your enemies. The moment some name is mentioned, immediately you jump into conclusion and think, "Oh, this person is coming from an enemy country, hence, he will be an enemy, he may be a terrorist, and he cannot be a friend." When you stereotype, you actually misjudge, or you become judgmental with your prejudiced opinion, which should be avoided.

1. Personality Barriers

- Rigidity of thought blurs the power of discrimination

People who neither learn from new information nor accept any contradictory view.

- Also, know-it-all's

Words like *all, always, everybody, none, never, nobody.*

Another thing that causes personality barrier is rigidity of thought. Rigidity is the opposite of openness, flexibility, ability to adapt to new ideas. Hence, people with rigidity of thinking neither learn from new information, nor accept different views. Their rigidity also blurs the power of discrimination. Close to them is the, “know it all” types. These people are the ones who say that they know everything. You can identify these people by the words that they frequently use such as *all, always, never, everybody*, etc. Thus, they keep saying—“all of them are like that”; “it is always done that way”; “everybody cheats, everybody does it that way”; “none will believe this, none can do this”; “it’s never done, never can be done this way”; “nobody will be willing to do this.” Just be cautious that you do not create such barriers while interacting with others!

In the next two lectures, I will discuss interpersonal and organizational barriers and suggest strategies for overcoming them. I will also illustrate how to avoid miscommunication.

REFERENCE

