

Communication Skills: Lecture No.4

Module 2

Lecture 3

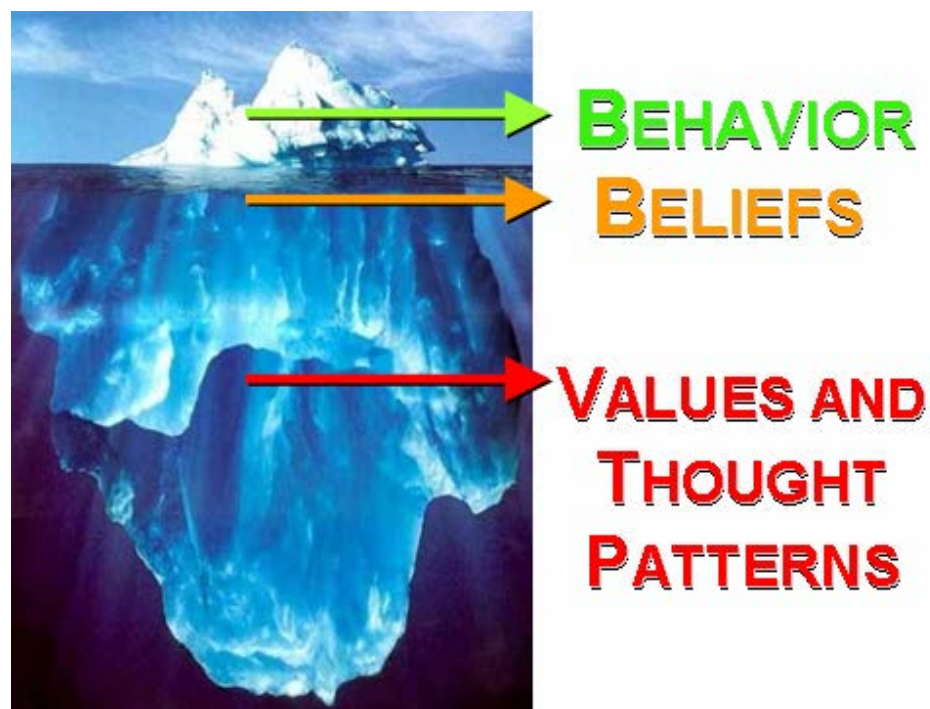
Barriers to Communication: Miscommunication

You might recall from the previous lectures of this module that a *barrier* is something that prevents *activelistingening* and *careful response*. These barriers act as physical, mental, emotional, and physiological blocks and cause *miscommunication*. The barriers can be *external* and/or *internal*. The external barriers are the outside, physical ones such as the noise, the climate, and the environment. The external barriers can be easily overcome. For instance, while making a phone call in an airport if the din of a flight taking off obstructs clarity in listening, you can always pause, or make another call. Even, you can ask the person at the other end to repeat what was said. However, the internal barriers are difficult to overcome. The internal barriers are the mental/psychological blocks that preoccupy the innermost thoughts and obstruct active listening. Such internal barriers are caused due to *illness (both physical and mental) anger, prejudice, bias, mental detouring, daydreaming, distraction, fear, lack of confidence, and nervousness*. These obstacles are within us. These may be a little difficult to get rid of but it is not possible to do so.

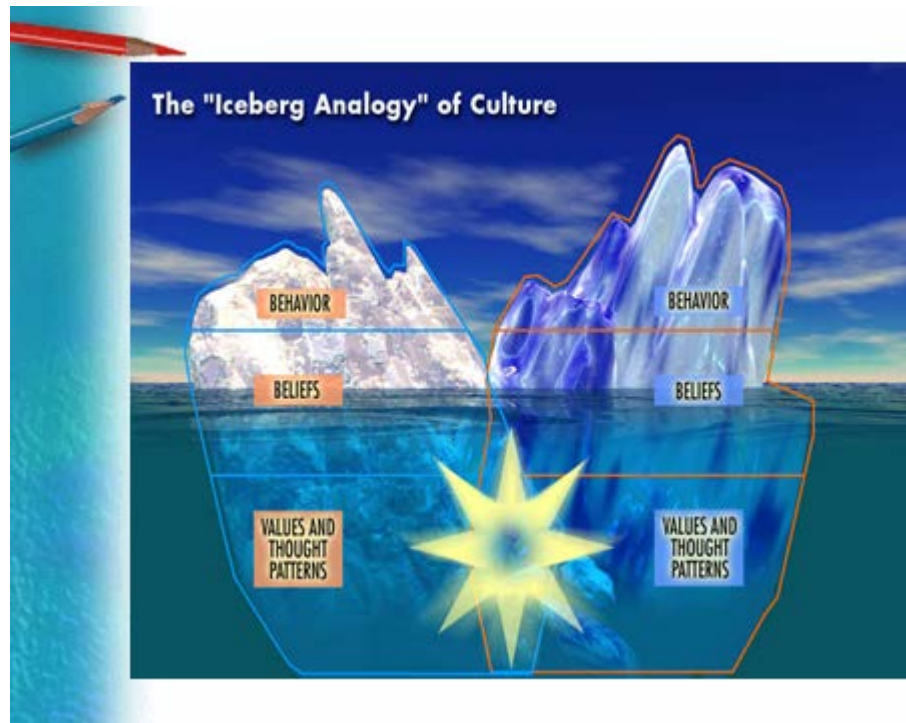
Some of these internal characteristics are not that easy to overcome because they are deeply embedded in us and culturally given to us. Our understanding itself is shaped by the communication climate, the context and setting, background and experiences, knowledge, mood, values, beliefs, and culture. As Edward Hall rightly observes: “Culture is communication and Communication is culture.” Communication and culture are treated synonymous with each other implying that when you communicate, you actually communicate your culture. Cultural itself is like an iceberg; 6/7th of it is under the water.



Only the topmost part is revealed to you in the form of *behavior*. But underneath you have your *beliefs*, which are imbedded very deep inside you in terms of values and thought patterns.



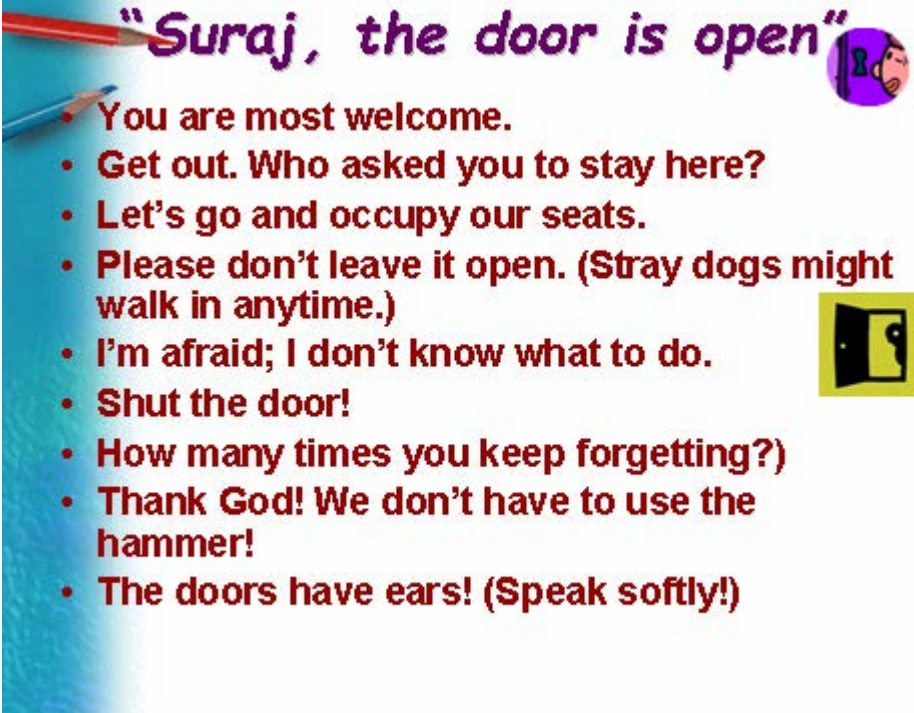
This iceberg analogy of culture makes us understand that in all interpersonal communication; often-conflicting values and thought patterns condition the communicators' beliefs and affect their behavior. When discordant behavior patterns confront each other, *miscommunication* takes place.



Miscommunication is the worst consequence of ineffective communication. Barriers to communication often cause miscommunication. The result is *counter-productive; the message is distorted or totally misinterpreted or misunderstood*. The entire time spent in communication is wasted, business climate is completely damaged, and the goodwill that was earned over generations gets lost.

Why does miscommunication happen? Mostly because of the inherent ambiguity in the language or the inappropriate medium that is used for communication. A wide variety of meanings is possible with just one set of verbal symbols. The contexts will, of course change, but the point is that the rich potential for interpretation makes communication difficult. This means that when you say something even within a clearly specified context, it is always possible for the interpreter/ the audience/the receiver to take a very different meaning that is not desired by you. Miscommunication happens because language, with its polysemous and ambiguous nature, causes plurality of meanings.


Moreover, while we communicate, we tend to play language games; very much like the way we play chess. We keep certain fixed rules in our mind and try to make out infinite sentences to express our ideas and thoughts. A simple sentence like “Suraj, the door is open” can give you at least ten meanings.



"Suraj, the door is open"

- You are most welcome.
- Get out. Who asked you to stay here?
- Let's go and occupy our seats.
- Please don't leave it open. (Stray dogs might walk in anytime.)
- I'm afraid; I don't know what to do.
- Shut the door!
- How many times you keep forgetting?)
- Thank God! We don't have to use the hammer!
- The doors have ears! (Speak softly!)

So, the same sentence can mean differently according to different contexts.




"Suraj, the door is open"

- Could this be the first line or title of a poem that you sing to welcome the sun-god to your home, especially after a terrible winter?

POSSIBLY, YES!






Interestingly, it can even be the first line or the title of a poem that you sing to welcome the sun god because Suraj in an Indian context refers to the Sun god.



"Suraj, the door is open"

**Suraj, the door is open—
The door of our country
My neighbour's door,
and my window's ...
All are open.
When will you come
With your bright glare
Sweep our dark floor
And warm us all?
Suraj, the door is open,
For you to come and
Cheer us all!**



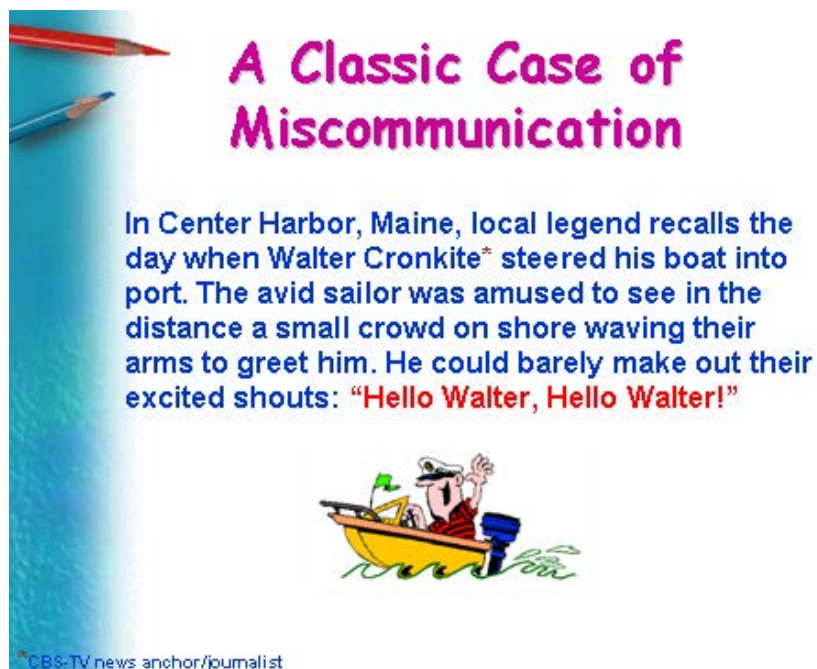
Accordingly, “Suraj the door is open” can also be an invitation to the Sun god to bless your cold home with its warmth after a terrible winter! Why do we play this language game when we can simply say what we mean in a simple sentence and make our message clear? It seems that we always enjoy leaving the possibility of second and third meaning. Besides, many people are not clear about what they want to convey, hence, they do not think clearly before they speak. Nonetheless, to be a professional and effective communicator, you should be aware of this fact, and then, try to send messages in a clear and unambiguous manner.




Today miscommunication has to be addressed in a global context. Thanks to globalization and the growth of multinational companies, employees compete at a global pool and are posted in an alien and heterogeneous environment. They have to interact with different people of different culture and different language. Remember that communication is culture specific; it is a system of symbols and beliefs. Hence, ignorance to other cultural symbols can lead to cross cultural conflicts. One interesting example is the conversation that happened in between an American and a Chinese in a graveyard. Both had come to pay homage to their ancestors who were buried there. While the American had kept over the grave some fragrant and beautiful flowers, the Chinese had kept many delicious dishes. The American took a side-glance at the dishes kept and smiled. The puzzled Chinese wanted to know why the American was finding it so funny. The American said, “I just wonder when your grandfather will come out of his grave to eat the entire dish that you had kept for him.” To which, the Chinese retorted very sharply: “By the time your grandfather would come out and have smelt all the flowers, my grandfather would have finished the entire dish!” This clearly indicates the perspective one upholds based on one’s deeply embedded cultural values and beliefs, however myopic they might be. What should be noted here is that what appears to be valuable in one culture appears to be ridiculous in another culture, and vice versa. In order to become an effective communicator, one should seek to learn such cultural variants and modulate the communication aspects. To avoid miscommunication owing to cultural ignorance, one needs to be open minded, tolerant, courteous, and keenly perceptive of the nonverbal symbol. One should pay attention to the way one greets, invites, shake hands, and shows respect in various cultures. Treating a foreigner the way the person wants to be treated will make intercultural communication effective. For

example, in India, gifting a clock or a wristwatch is considered auspicious, whereas, it offends a Chinese as it signifies some bad omen.


What is miscommunication? It is being told you before that communication involves *action/transaction*, and thus miscommunication can be viewed as instances of *action/transaction failure*. This means that the speaker fails to produce the intended effect or owing to misperception, the hearer cannot recognize what the speaker intended to communicate. The following is a classic case of miscommunication that happened in case of Walter Cronkite, a very famous CBS TV news anchor and journalist.



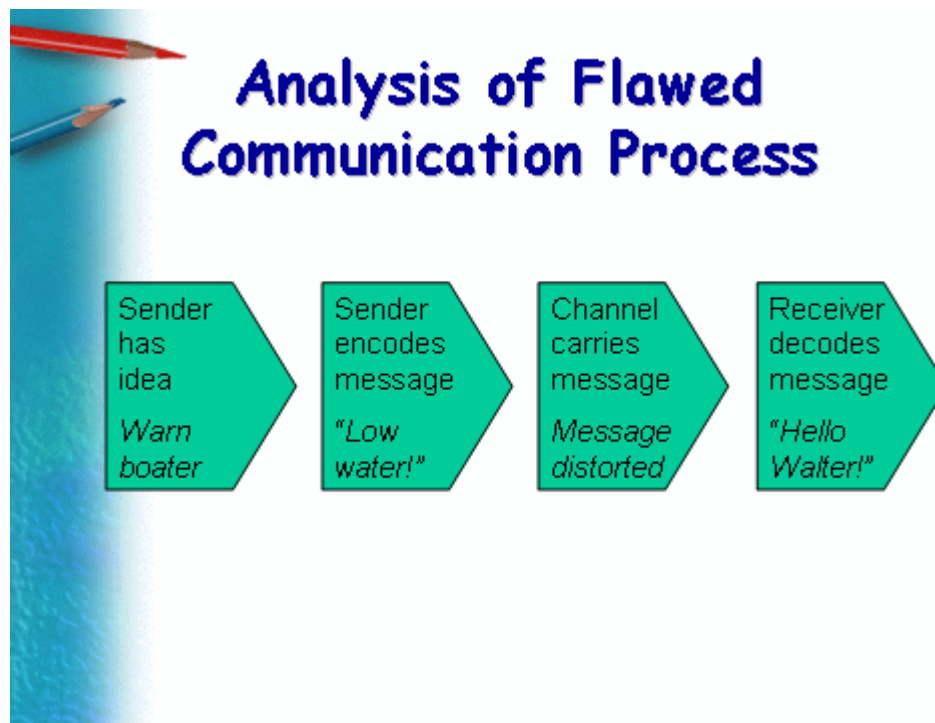


A Classic Case of Miscommunication...

As his boat came closer, the crowd grew larger, still yelling. Pleased at the reception, Cronkite tipped his white captain's hat, waved back, even took a bow. But before reaching dockside, Cronkite's boat abruptly jammed aground. The crowd stood silent. The veteran news anchor suddenly realized what they'd been shouting: **"Low water, low water!"**



Let us quickly make an analysis of the flawed communication process in the above context.



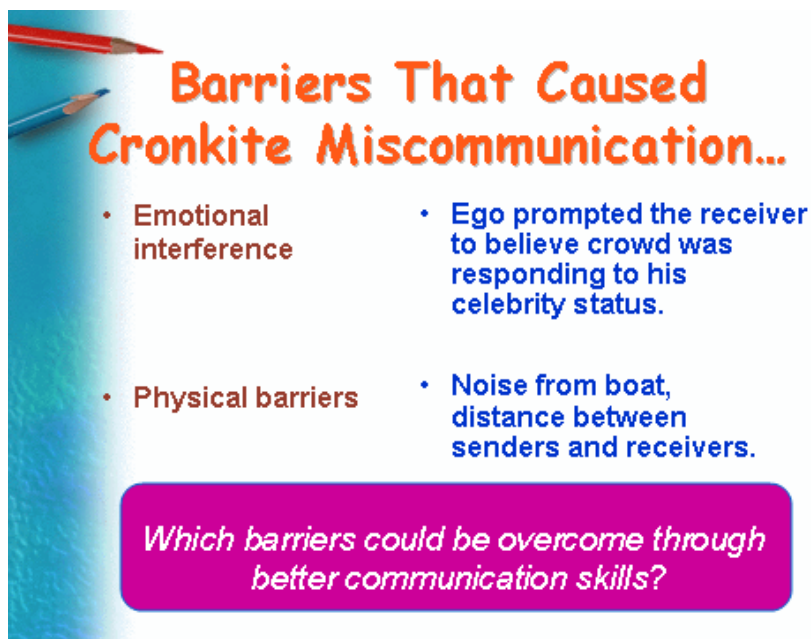
In this case, though there is no problem of language barrier, message was distorted because of the way it was spoken and the noise from the boat.



Barriers That Caused Cronkite Miscommunication

- Frame of reference
 - Receiver is accustomed to acclaim and appreciative crowds.
- Language skills
 - Maine accent makes "water" and "Walter" sound similar.
- Listening skills
 - Receiver is more accustomed to speaking than to listening.

The major flaw was that the receiver is not habituated to active listening. Ego prompted the receiver to believe that the crowd was responding to his celebrity status.

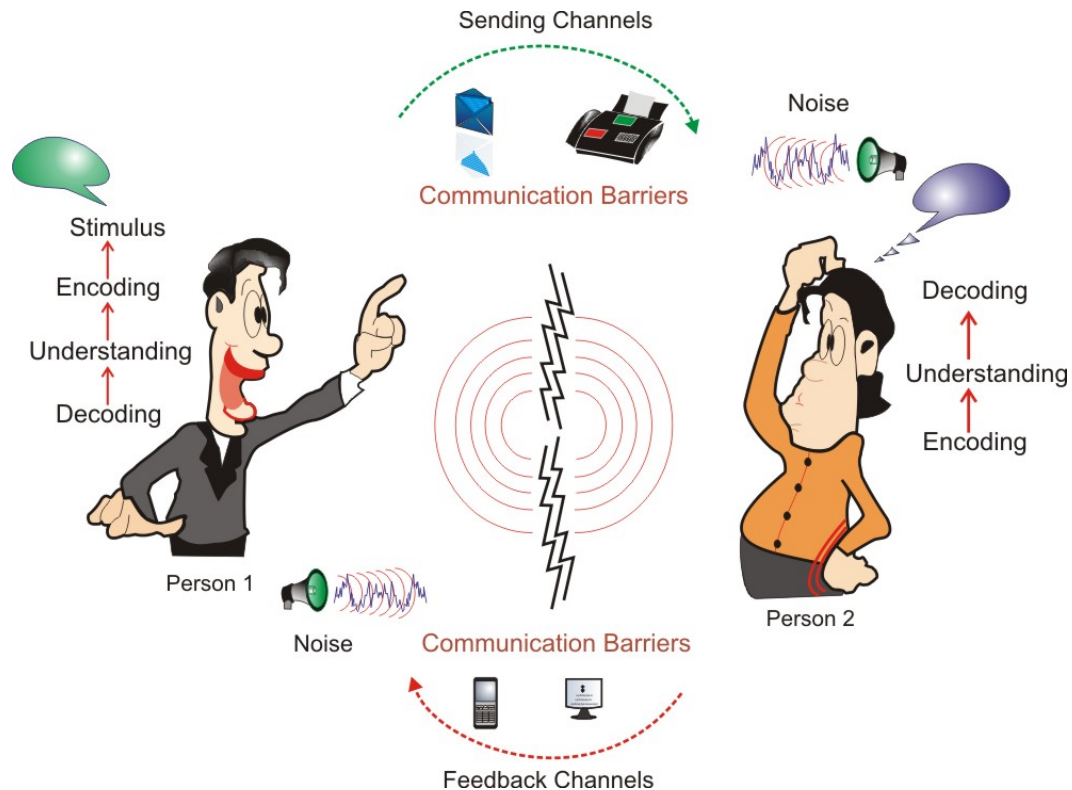


Barriers That Caused Cronkite Miscommunication...

- Emotional interference
 - Ego prompted the receiver to believe crowd was responding to his celebrity status.
- Physical barriers
 - Noise from boat, distance between senders and receivers.

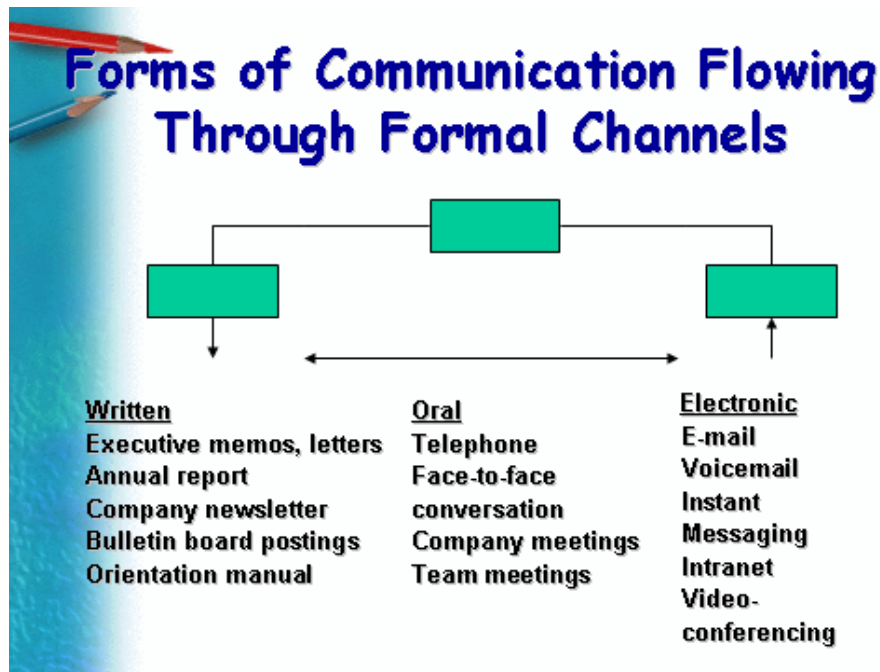
Which barriers could be overcome through better communication skills?

In the given context, Cronkite will not be able to overcome the physical barrier because unless he stops the boat, he cannot stop the noise from the boat.

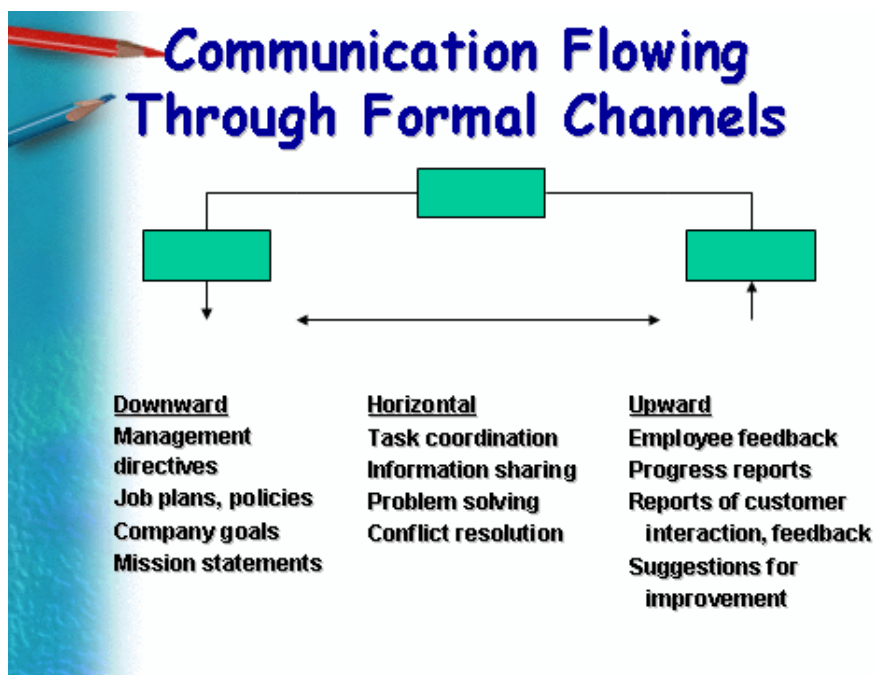


Nonetheless, he could have lowered down his ego, tried to be a better listener, and be empathetic to understand the crowd's perspective. The people on the shore could have also supplemented their message with nonverbal communication as showing the red flag to indicate danger.

Now let us look at the barriers to communication, which act as obstacles to *information flow in organization*. Most of the time, the communication climate happens to be very closed in organizational setup despite the fact that many channels such as emails, SMS, fax, voice message, etc., are available.



The administrative setup normally follows *downward*, *horizontal*, *upward* flow pattern.



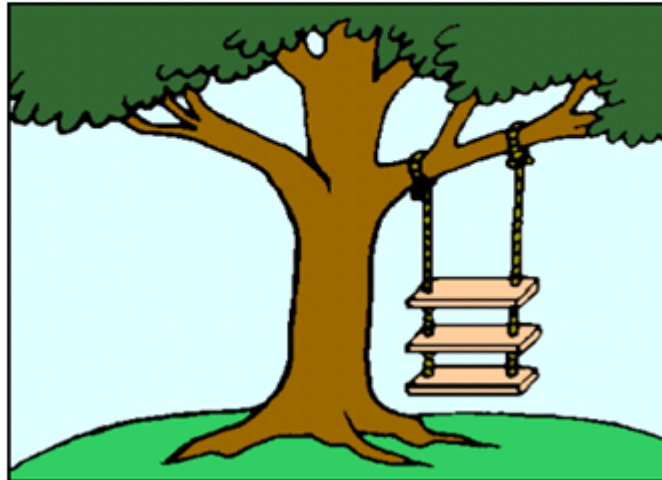
However, long lines of communication and too many transfer stations distort and delay the message. Besides, lack of trust between management and employees can also cause barrier. Under such circumstance, employees will turn to an informal system, the grapevine. They will start believing in rumour, and gather information laterally, through unreliable sources. In addition, the competition for power, status, rewards create a closed communication environment. In such an environment, the 100% message at first written by the Board of Director is distorted when it finally reaches the worker.



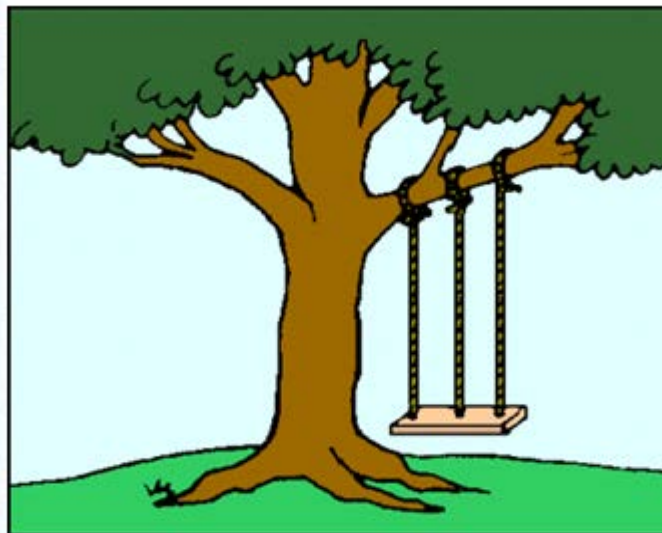
Often the worker at the bottom level gets only 20% of the original message. This message distortion leads to miscommunication.

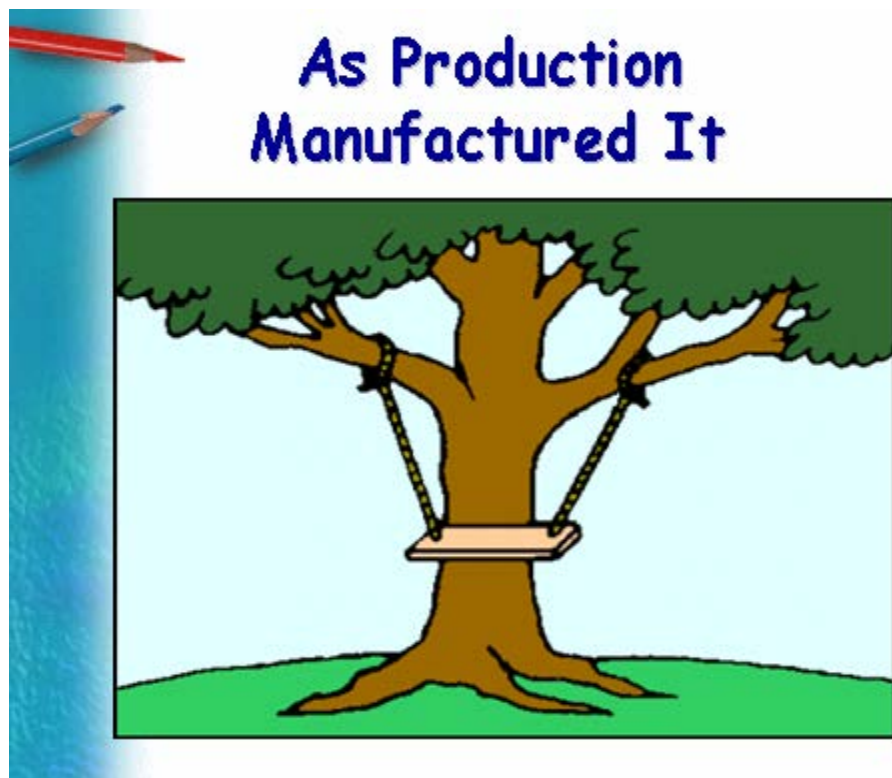
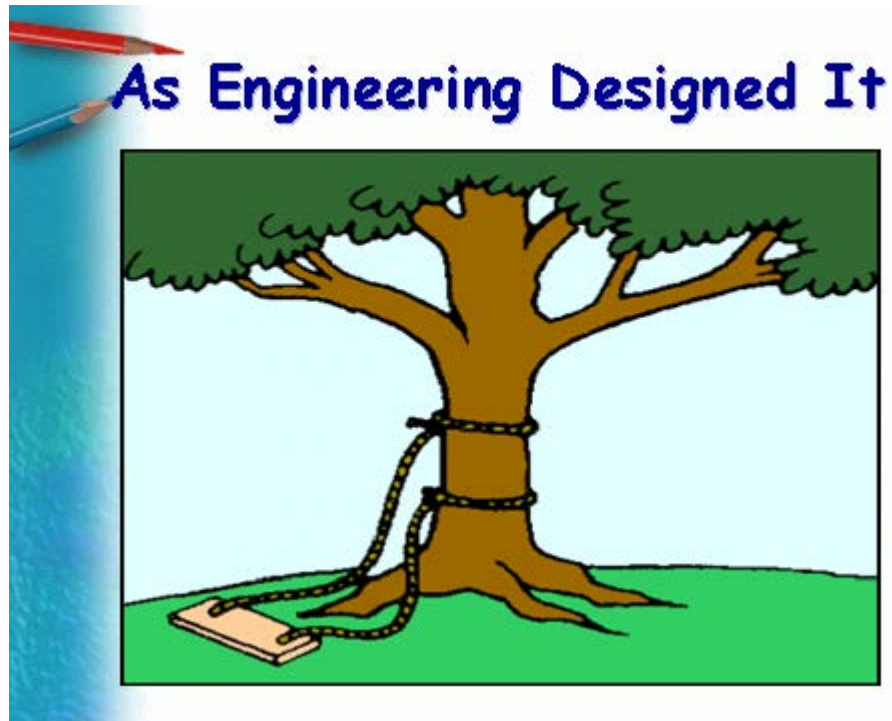
Let us look at another interesting example of how miscommunication can happen in product involvement.

**As Marketing Requested It
(a three-tier swing)**



As Sales Ordered It







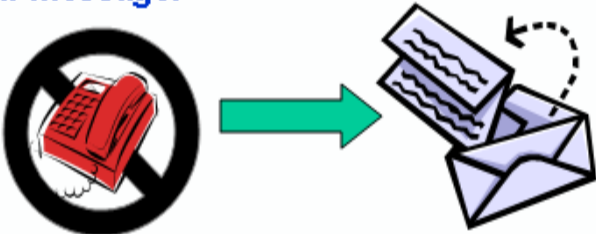
So you see how communication is distorted, and how miscommunication can happen. Perhaps, clearing of the *semantic gap* between “tier” and “tyre,” and minimizing the multiple levels of channels, could have minimized the damage!

In an organizational set-up, all the barriers can be overcome by modifying the communication network. Thus, instead of using the top to bottom, the downward, or the upward system, *direct access* should be followed. Besides, if you are at the top, you should disseminate your message through several channels. Instead of just putting it up a message on the notice board, you can also email or SMS it. You can talk to people individually on phone or make use of teleconferencing to communicate with a group. Also, you should use feedback system involving more than one source. Always remember to make use of appropriate channels. In case you find a channel ineffective, you rework the message and send it by another channel.

Activity

Overcoming Barriers

- Improve communication by evaluating responses to your messages.
- Change your approach by choosing another medium or by reworking your message.



Overall, you should take all efforts to create an open environment for interaction and feedback. This is possible if you adopt an audience-centred approach, foster open communication, and create clean, efficient, easily decodable messages.

One method that is commonly suggested is to remember the acronym “RAPID,” which you can use to overcome communication barriers, thereby, avoids miscommunication.



RAPID Overcoming of Communication Barriers

- **Realize** communication is imperfect
- **Adapt** message to receiver
- **Plan** for feedback
- **Improve** language and listening skills
- **Doubt** preconceptions



So, hopefully, I think that these three lectures in this module have provided you with lots of tips and suggestions for overcoming barriers and making your communication effective.

REFERENCES

