

The process requires a certain humility that allows one to place all participants on an equal footing and hold no one's thoughts, ideas, position, etc., beneath your own even though you may be the "highest" present. Everyone involved in a discussion is responsible for getting meaning out onto the table. You can tell, however, that not all meaning is out there by the presence of confusion, silence, emotion (anger, aloofness, etc.), and often by body language. But although it is everyone's basic responsibility, it is not happening and you are the principal authority present, it is up to you to act to bring the others into full participation.

Overall, one's approach to interpersonal communication—anyone, but especially someone in a leadership position—should be governed by common sense and respect for others. How the employees view their leaders will be significantly influenced by—perhaps even fully determined by—the leaders' communication style.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Semantics

Words, our most actively used tools of communication, are in truth quite inadequate for the role we make them play. We expect far too much of these small bits of language. A word is simply a symbol we use to stand for something; it is not the thing itself. The only true meanings words have are the meanings we give them through active use.

Words are also likely to mean different things to different people. For instance, how long or short a span of time does prompt mean to you? Some words can even mean different things to the same person at different times or under different circumstances. For example, fix may mean one thing if you happen to be repairing an automobile and something else entirely if your immediate interest is locating a reference point for navigation purposes.

We have words in our language that can be described only as fuzzy in terms of meaning and usage. Take a good look at a few of the words that fill our organizational communication, sometimes to the point of overflowing. Again, we have prompt. We also have sufficient, appropriate, adequate, and other similarly vague terms. What meaning are you going to get if the last sentence of the memorandum you just received says: "You are requested to take prompt action, employing adequate measures to ensure appropriate response sufficient to the situation"?

Emotion

Words often carry emotional overtones that vary from person to person and create additional barriers to interpersonal communication. Words that register neutrally or perhaps favorably on some people are likely to hit "sore spots" in other people. Aside from the obvious—profanity, obscenity, ethnic slurs, and downright insults—many words used without malicious intent will trigger negative emotional responses in listeners. Perhaps the word stubborn does not bother you, but the person you are talking with may resent being referred to

as stubborn. Perhaps your boss places a favorable connotation on the term "eager beaver" and applies this to you; however, you may resent the term suggesting you are trying too hard or bordering on being annoying. (You might prefer to be called a "loyal and energetic employee.")

times touch one of someone's sore spots and trigger an emotional reaction. Consider the times you may have turned away from a conversation with the impression that you have somehow hurt, offended, or angered the other person, and you honestly did not have the slightest idea of what you might have said to cause that reaction. You do this unintentionally, and it is not likely that you will ever be able to eliminate this from your communication entirely. However, what you can do is be aware that this occurs with all people in interpersonal situations and, exercising empathy, try to understand the other person's position. Also, since you may hurt, offend, or anger someone unintentionally, always extend to the other person the benefit of the doubt. Remember that when someone touches one of your little sore spots and you are hurt, offended, or angered, chances are it was completely accidental and no injury was intended.

Positive emotions can be good to some extent in interpersonal communication. However, even positive emotions (e.g., joy or enthusiasm) can cloud individual judgment and impair communication when they are experienced to a degree that the feelings themselves become more important than the message being communicated.

The negative emotions—hurt and anger and all their variations—definitely tend to impair effective communication. Generally, the higher the negative emotional level of one or both parties to an interpersonal exchange the lower are the chances of meaningful communication. When emotion threatens to turn a discussion into an argument, it is time to back away from the situation as diplomatically as possible and try again when tempers have abated. Emotion in interpersonal exchange also tends to polarize views and drive

Emotion in interpersonal exchange also tends to polarize views and drive participants toward opposite positions. Anger or any of its variations are also likely to be evident in the behavior of someone who has been put on the defensive and is using emotion unconsciously to cover a weakness or shield a position from attack.

It would be easy, but quite useless, for us to say we should not allow ourselves to be hurt or angry. You cannot help experiencing a feeling, and feelings themselves are neither right nor wrong—they are just there. However, be aware of the destructive potential of negative feelings.

In all dealings with your employees and others, be reasonably careful of the words you use, remain normally polite and friendly, and do not hesitate to be conciliatory if it appears necessary or helpful. Although you happen to be the manager and occupy a so-called position of authority, never consider yourself too important to apologize when you err in your interpersonal communication. In all dealings with other persons, and especially in dealing with employees on critical issues and points of difference, avoid sweeping generalizations that are by their nature untrue. Two of the worst words you can use are always and never, as in "You're always late," or "You never submit it correctly." Rarely are always and never strictly true, but both are usually inflammatory.

Personal Barriers

As individuals we all have limitations that function as barriers to effective communication. We have the tendency to generalize. Concerning most things in life, sooner or later we have to generalize to be able to take part in life and to communicate at all. However, when we generalize based on limited information or on a single case or example ("See one and you've seen 'em all") we limit our communications effectiveness. Even generalizing at all means erecting barriers because our generalizations always exclude some information. We also tend to categorize or pigeonhole by putting people or things into a limited number of compartments. Rarely are there only a pair of alternatives as in "There are two sides to every issue"; usually there are a number of possibilities and sometimes a large supply of options. In a practical sense, however, we cannot recognize an infinite number of pigeonholes; the best we can do is to remain open to all reasonable possibilities.

We are also limited in our communications effectiveness by the state of the information we are dealing with. Our minds have stored thousands upon thousands of images, but these are all exactly as we last experienced them. For example, someone you have not seen in 10 years still resides in your memory appearing exactly as 10 years ago. Yet you are always communicating in the here and now, so you are attempting to participate in a continuing process in the present using information that is going more out of date by the moment.

The Greatest Barrier: False Understanding

The key to most everyday misunderstandings resides in two basic assumptions: assuming that others always know what you are talking about and assuming that you always know what others are talking about without taking steps to make certain. In other words, simple one-to-one communication is fraught with traps if there is no feedback on each transaction, no effort made to "close the loop" and verify the message. This is a particularly deadly barrier because we go away from each transaction *believing* we have understood. This false understanding is further enhanced by the tendency of a great many individuals to hear what they want to hear, to believe what they want to believe. We can be extremely effective at self-deception, especially when the foregoing two basic communication assumptions play directly into it.

In many ways we can be led astray by who we are, what we are, what we believe, and how we behave. Among characteristics that impede communication one of the most frequently encountered is the tendency toward *negative attribution*. This involves our perceptions of other peoples' motives and our frequently exhibited tendency to think the worst of others. That is, we tend to imagine the worst possible motives behind the things that others say and do. But to successfully communicate one to one we need at be able to give the other party the benefit of the doubt and assume reasonable motives unless experience give us reason to believe otherwise.

Another related problem encountered regularly is the tendency to jump to conclusions, that is, drawing conclusions based on limited observations. And

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