Barriers to Communication

The term 'barrier' means 'hurdle', 'hindrance' or 'obstacle'. Thus, barriers to communication imply hurdles or obstacles on the way of transmission of message from the sender to the receiver. In practice, there exist several barriers in communication which render it ineffective. They generate confusion, conflict and misunderstanding in the organisation by creating bottlenecks, delays and distortions of information. Several organisational problems relating to smooth working and human relations exist today in the enterprises because of these barriers. Sometimes, barriers tend to distort the message and create friction among the organisational members and also adversely affect the morale of the employees as well as are injurious to team-work. Some other reasons may be responsible for the complete breakdown in communication. A large number of organisational problems are caused by barriers to communication. It is essential to find out such barriers and take steps to remove them for the accomplishment of effective communication.

4.1 NOISE AS A BARRIER

"Noise" is the disruption or interference in communication process anywhere along the way as shown in Fig. 5.1. It can occur at any point in the communication process. Noise can be the sound of someone coughing, a truck driving by, or two people talking close at hand. It can also include disruptions such as a letter being lost in the mail (either traditional or electronic), a telephone line going dead, or one of the participants in a conversation being called away before the communication process is completed.
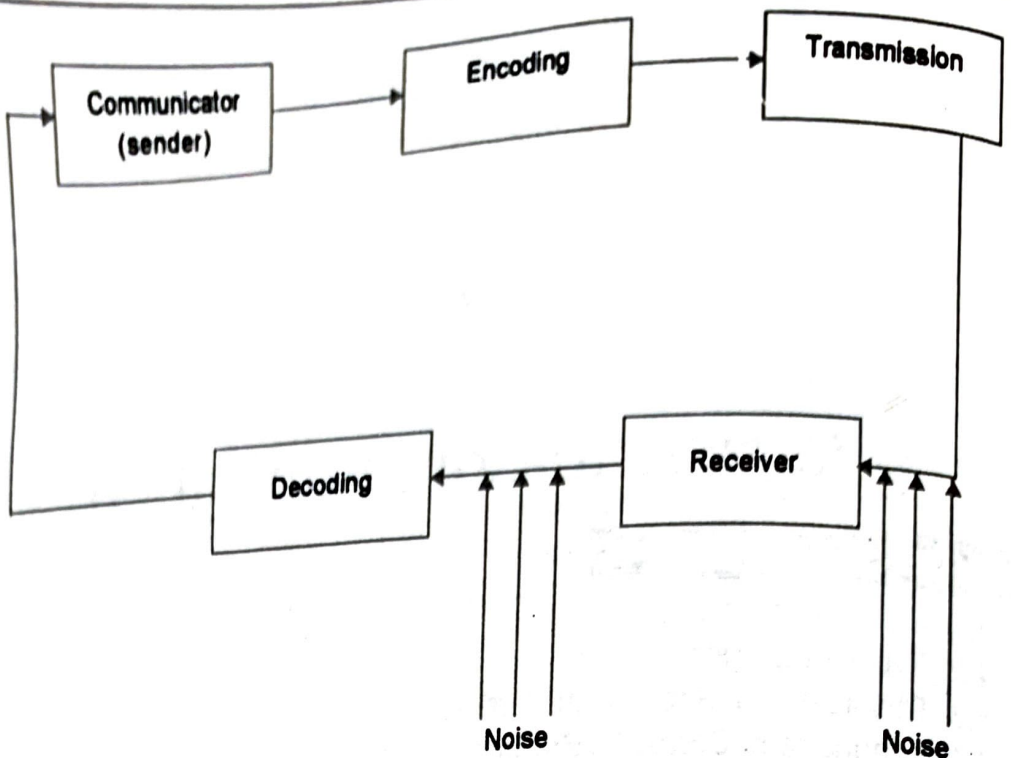
Fig. 4.1. The Process of Communication.

Noise may arise because a manager is not able to express himself well; attention of listener is not on the message : memos are poorly reproduced or written and thus are hard to read. However, if communication is two way, communicator may determine if the message has been received and if it has produced intended response.

4.2 TYPES OF BARRIERS

Various kinds of barriers to communication may be classified as under :

(1) Physical and Mechanical Barriers

(2) Language or semantic barriers.

(3) Socio-psychological barriers.

(4) Organisational barriers.
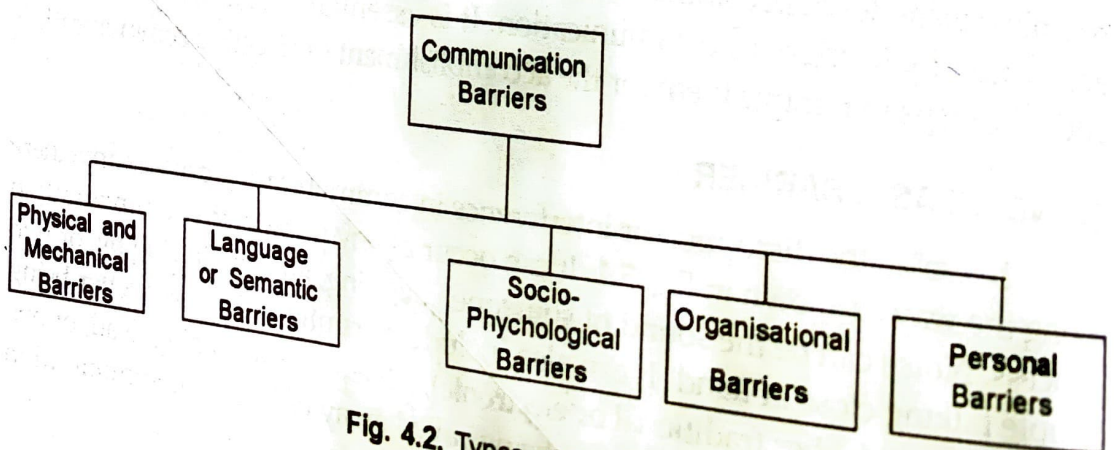
(5) Personal barriers.

Fig. 4.2. Types of Barriers

4.3 PHYSICAL AND MECHANICAL BARRIERS

The physical and mechanical barriers may be caused by noise, distance, time and information overload. These are discussed below.

(i) **Noise** : Communication does not occur in totally noise-free environment. Noise, though of varying degree, disturbs or interferes with communication. Due to higher level of noise in telelphone some time irrelevant information may be screened out and some time relevant information may be left out. Adverse weather conditions and faulty tele-communication system are the other most common barriers. Noise due to heavy traffic machines, human sounds, construction/demolition works, fans etc., make communication difficult. Whatever that distracts the receiver's attention causes communication breakdown. Noise can be physical and psychological. Physical disturbances or distractions — such as gossip, loud speakers etc.; draw the attention of the receiver while psychological noise is related to the mental disturbance — ego clash, pre occupied thoughts, hang-over, fatigue, anxiety, preconceived ideas. All such noises lead to miscommunication and steps need be taken to minimise them.

(ii) **Distance** : Long distances between the senders and receivers can also obstruct effective communication. If sender and receiver are separated by geographical distances, tele-communication is most often resorted to—disturbance in telephone connection can result in miscommunication or incomplete communication.

(iii) **Time** : Time refers to the reaching of the message. If an important message reaches late it is sure to affect communication. For instance, factories have shift systems. Persons working in different shifts fail to communicate due to time gap.

(iv) **Information Overload** : It refers to excessive transmission of information. Much more information than what the receiver can process is transmitted to him. The receiver cannot understand, digest, analyse and act upon information overload that is beyond his mental capacity. It results in various problems :

(a) Receivers may not act upon a part of the information, which may be an important one.

(b) They may make errors in processing excessive information.

(c) If they wish to be accurate, they may delay the processing of information.

(v) **Physical Barriers** : Outdated machines and equipment may produce excessive noise leading to physical barriers in communication. Further, distraction, like background noise, poor lighting, too cold or too hot weather, etc. affect the morale of the employees and also obstruct effective communication.

(vi) **Use of Words with Different Meanings** : Communication is mainly carried through spoken and written words. But the words used may convey different meanings to different people. For example, the word 'tube' may mean a fluorescent tube, a cycle tube, or a water tube. When the reader or listener assigns a different

meaning to a word than what the writer or speaker intended, there occurs miscommunication. People interpret the same word differently due to differences in their economic, social, cultural and educational backgrounds. For example, the word 'cost' may mean cost of production to the production manager, cost of distribution to the sales manager, expenditure to the finance manager and so on.

(vii) **Denotations and Connotations** : Words have two types of meanings— denotative and connotative. The literal meaning of a word is known by its denotative meaning. It just names the object without suggesting positive and negative qualities. Pen, Book, Chair, Table and Computer are some examples of denotative words. On the other hand, connotative words like honest, punctual, competent and cheap arouse qualitative judgements. Some of these words like honest and competent have positive connotations. Other words like cheap and selfish have negative connotations. But certain words have both positive and negative connotations in different contexts. One such word is 'cheap'. For example, the purchase manager tells the office manager, "I purchased this table very cheap". Here the purchase manager wants to convey that he has paid lower price for the table (positive connotation). But the office manager perceives the table to be of lower or cheaper quality (negative connotation). This might cause misunderstanding between the two.

4.4 LANGUAGE OR SEMANTIC BARRIERS

Language is the carrier of all information and ideas. People of different levels understand, write and speak differently. A speech or statement given in English may not be understood by many of the employees in a factory. The language having the use of mathematical symbols and abbreviations, or self-coined words may not be understood by the recipients. In such cases, the communicator should use the language and words mostly used and easily understood by the receivers.

Sometimes, loosely structured message may also render communication ineffective. Lack of coherence, errors of omission and commission in sentence construction, use of jargons and such other deficiencies mar the meaning and message of communication. Just as thinking can corrupt the language used, the latter can also corrupt thinking.

The most common types of semantic barriers are as follows :

(i) **Unclear Message** : Lack of clarity and precision in a message makes it badly expressed. Poorly chosen and empty words and phrases, careless omission, lack of coherence, bad organisation of ideas, awkward sentence structure, inadequate vocabulary, platitudes, numbing repetition jargon, failure to clarify implications are some common faults found in this case.

(ii) **Faulty Translation** : Every manager receives various types of communications from superiors, peers, subordinates and he must translate information destined for subordinates, peers and superiors into language suitable to each. Hence the message has to be put into words appropriate to the framework in which the receiver operates, or it must be accompanied by an interpretation

which will be understood by the receiver. This needs a high level of linguistic capacity. Approximate understanding of words and the consequent faulty translations lead to impaired efficiency and heavy costs.

(*iii*) **Specialist's Language** : It is often found that technical personnel and special groups tend to develop a special, peculiar and technical language of their own. This increases their isolation from others and builds a communication barrier. Whatever be the intention of this special language, it hinders their communication with persons not in their speciality, because of the receiver's ignorance of that type of language.

(*iv*) **Unclarified Assumptions** : There are certain uncommunicated assumptions which underlie practically all messages. Though a message appears to be specific, its underlying assumptions may not be clear to the receiver.

4.5 SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS

Psychological needs and feelings are the prime barriers in organisational communication process. Listening, interpretation or encoding and decoding of a message depends upon the psychological state of both transmitter and the receiver. The following are some of the psychological barriers inhibiting communication :

(*i*) **Differences in Perception** : Perceptual barriers may arise due to differences between individuals in the way they perceive, organise and understand their environment. Sometimes, barrier may also be due to the use of a particular language or jargon by the people belonging to the same occupational group. Differences in perception arise from different job experiences, educational backgrounds, value systems, and so on. Accordingly, a person receiving a message may interpret it in the light of his own background. If there is an openness in relationship, everything that is communicated will be readily believed. Not so, however, if there is a mutual distrust or misunderstanding between the sender and the receiver of the message.

(*ii*) **Differences in Attitudes** : People differ with regard to attitudes and opinions which often interfere with communication. For example, if the message is consistent with our attitudes and opinions we receive it favourably. On the other hand, if the message is contrary to our expectations, beliefs and cherished values we do not react favourably to it. For example, a news of bonus is likely to be received favourably by employees. But they may oppose a move of the management to instal latest machines due to the belief that it will reduce job opportunities for them.

(*iii*) **Emotions** : How the receiver feels at the time of receipt of information influences effectively how he interprets the information. For example, if the receiver feels that the communicator is in jovial mood, he interprets that the information being sent by the communicator to be good and interesting. Extreme emotions and jubilation or depression are quite likely to hinder the effectiveness of communication.

(iv) Inattention : Communication has no impact on those who are unable or unwilling to listen. This may be a matter of motivation. If people do not pay the required degree of attention to listening and understanding the messages they are supposed to receiver, communication will lose its purpose. Also, some people are too quick in commenting on information as it is being received from the sender, without waiting for full information. This may drive the sender to frustration and into a sense of futility. The sender may then learn to be diffident in transmitting messages to such pre-mature evaluators.

(v) Closed Minds : One of the assumptions implicit in the communication process is that both the receiver and the sender have open minds, which enable them to process information in an uninhibited manner. If people limit their 'agenda' to their own narrow goals and views, no effective communication is possible because closed minds regard all information as unnecessary 'overload'.

(vi) Premature Evaluation : Some people form a judgement before receiving the complete message. Such premature evaluation prevents effective communication. Once you form a judgement or response your mind is closed to the rest of the message. The judgement or decision based on incomplete information is likely to be wrong. Your concentration is lost. The time and energy which should have been used to assimilate the message are wasted in evaluating the speaker and his manner of presentation. Therefore, we must listen to or read the full message before reacting to it.

(vii) Distrust : It arises out of ill-considered judgements or illogical decisions or frequent countermanding of the original communication by the communicator. Repeated experience of this kind gradually conditions the receiver to delay action or act unenthusiastically, hence making the communication unsuccessful, though apparently it is complete.

(viii) Resistance to Change : It is general tendency of human beings to maintain *status quo*. When new ideas are being communicated, the listening apparatus may act as a filter in rejecting new ideas. Thus resistance to change is an important obstacle to effective communication. Sometimes, organisations announce changes which seriously affect the employees, *e.g.*, changes in timings, places and order of work, installation of new plant, etc. Changes affect people in different ways and it may take some time to think through the full meaning on the message. Hence, it is important for the management not to force changes before people are in a position to adjust to their implications.

(ix) Cultural Differences : Cultural differences are faced when managers deal with people of different cultures. Culture refers to values, beliefs, norms, attitudes and perceptions of people of different nations (India, America, Japan etc.) or regions (different regions in India). When managers deal with employees of different nations (in multinational coporations), they must regard cultural values or beliefs; otherwise, they may not be able to convey what they really wish to. Symbols, words, colours, gestures, language must be carefully selected when senders of information are dealing with poeple of different nations or regions.

4.6. ORGANISATIONAL BARRIERS

An organisation is a deliberate creation for the attainment of certain specified objectives. This is usually attempted through a variety of official measures such as designing the organisational arrangements for performance of various activities, prescribing of various policies, rules, regulations and procedures, laying down of norms of behaviour, instituting a reward–and–punishment system, etc. All the inner processes, including communication in different directions, are markedly affected by these prescriptions. As such major organisational barriers are as follows :

(i) **Status Relationship** : Organisation structure creates a number of status levels among the members of the organisation. Status refers to the regard and attitude displayed and held towards a position by the members of the organisation. For instance, there is a difference in the status level of the chief executive and director-incharge of production of a company. This difference becomes apparent as one communicates with another. This may create hurdles in two-way-communication. The common causes for obstacle in communication due to status are non-listening habit of the superior and desire to keep maximum information with oneself. Sometimes, subordinates also avoid seeking clarifications from the superior because they feel that it will lower down their prestige. The barrier due to status or position can be overcome if there is free and fair two-way flow of communication in the organisation.

(ii) **One-way Flow** : Effective communication is a two-way street. In two-way communication, both the sender and the receiver feel free to interact in ways which tend to enhance the quality of the exchange process. But where the flow of feedback from the receiver or the listener is blocked, understanding will suffer. In fact, one-way communication in some situations is not communication at all.

(iii) **Organisation Structure** : The organisation structure has an important influence on the ability of the members of the organisation to communicate effectively. But these days, the organisation structure of most big enterprises is complex involving : (a) several layers of supervision, (b) long communication lines, (c) co-existence of specialists, and (d) organisational distance between the workers and the top management. Organisation structure creates problems because communication may break down at any level of supervision due to faulty transmission in order to overcome these difficulties.

(iv) **Rules and Regulations** : Organisational rules and regulations affect the flow of communication by prescribing the subject-matter to be communicated and also the channel through which these are to be communicated. The rules may restrict the flow of certain messages and may leave many important ones. On the other hand, communication through proper channel in a specified way prescribed by these rules delays it and works against the willingness of persons to convey the message. This barrier is strongly operative in Indian public sector enterprises where observance of rules and regulations is more rigid.

(v) Distance Barriers : Distance is another barrier to effective communication. If both communicator and communicatee are at distant places, the communicatee fails to get the immediate clarification required. He implements the way, he understands the communication.

(vi) Physical Barriers : Communication becomes ineffective due to physical factors such as noise pollution of machines, vehicles and environment. Due to noise pollution and suffocation a communicator cannot give complete and effective message to communicatee.

(vii) Mechanical Barriers : Equipments used for communication should always be in the perfect working order. Any defect in the equipments may distort the impressions. Sometimes, it becomes too late to communicate as the scheduled time passes away.

4.7 PERSONAL BARRIERS

While the organisational factors discussed above are, no doubt, important influences operating on communication, a host of factors internal to the two parties—sender and receiver—to this process also exert important influences on its operation, as communication is basically an inter-personal process. Some of the personal barriers are as follows :

(i) Attitude of Superiors : The attitudes of superiors towards communication in general or in any particular direction affect the flow of messages in different directions. For example, if this attitude is unfavourable, there is a greater possibility that messages would not flow adequately from and/or to superior.

(ii) Lack of Confidence in Subordinates : Superiors generally perceive, correct or otherwise, that their subordinates are less competent and capable, they are not able to advise superiors or they may not have some information coming downwards.

(iii) Insistence of Proper Channel : One of the basic features of superiors' exercising of the authority is that they wish to remain in communication links and they do not like any type of bypassing in communication. Communication through bypassing may, sometimes, be necessary but superiors treat this as thwarting of their authority and this blocks the flow of communication.

(iv) Ignoring Communication : Sometimes superiors consciously and deliberately ignore the communication from their subordinates to maintain their importance. This works against the willingness of subordinates to communicate.

(v) Filtering of Information : Sometimes, the sender intentionally screens the information for passing only such information which will look favourable to the receiver. This is because of the simple reason that no one likes to show his mistakes to someone else, especially to his boss. The boss, on the other hand, wants to obtain information about what is actually going on, especially those actions that need his attention. The remedies for filtering are a well-designed feedback system,

development of rapport with subordinates, listening to subordinates with an understanding attitude and reducing the fear of failure.

(vi) **Lack of Time :** "No time", "lack of time" are the terms frequently used by the superiors. They do not spare considerable time to talk to their subordinates. They feel, whether real or not, that they are overburdened with work.

(vii) **Message Overload :** Message overload is really a hurdle in the communication process. If message overload is routine, there is a grave danger to the orderly and smooth flow of communication. The effect of overload may be omission of message, errors, delay, filtering, approximation. They are barriers to communication.

(viii) **Barriers in Subordinates :** Subordinates are also equally responsible for restricting communication flow particularly in upward direction. They act as barriers in a number of ways as indicated below :

(a) They dislike to show mistakes.
(b) People generally resist new ideas.
(c) Unwillingness to communicate upward a message on personal grounds.
(d) Lack of incentives and encouragement.
(e) They suppress information relating to their failures.

(ix) **Miscellaneous Barriers.** Sometimes, sheer fear and distrust mar effective communication. The sender may fear that the consequences of transmitting a particular message may destabilise his own position or the position of the receiver, even though it is in the larger interest of the organisation to communicate. Some managers also lose credibility if they are indecisive, inconsistent and indiscreet in transmitting and receiving information. People who receive from and transmit information to them seldom attach much importance to the content. Also, personality clashes among individuals clog the communication channels. Emotions, jealousy, hatred, conflicting values and interests also interfere with the communication process.