Unit I
Lesson 4: Barriers to Effective Communication

Introduction

As we communicate, we will constantly be affected by a huge variety of distractions, or barriers if you will, internally and externally. In addition to those previously addressed in this unit, another type of distraction is called a semantic distraction. These distractions occur when people use specific words that interfere with the ability to listen to and comprehend messages. All communicators must learn how to recognize and overcome this specific barrier that can interfere with and disrupt a person’s ability to listen to and send coherent messages.

Internal Barriers (or Distractions)

Barriers that are generated by a person’s feelings and emotions are labelled internal distractions. These distractions are capable of interfering with an individual’s productivity and every communication effort. First, one has to recognize and then aggressively exert the effort to silence these feelings and emotions in order to carry out successful communication as both a sender and receiver of messages.

One example of how internal barriers affect our productivity often occurs, in fact, in the preparation stage of a variety of messages. Stress generated by the anxiety of preparing and organizing an effective message is common to everyone. If you are unsure about the content or structure of the message you are preparing, sometimes doing some additional research will help alleviate that fear and end the distraction. One of the best solutions to this barrier is to have a colleague look over your work, or particular parts of the work, and provide recommendations. The right person can render as much comfort as correction under these circumstances because a communication that potentially has serious consequences for an individual or business is capable of producing great anxiety for any writer.

While working, you may be thinking of your family or of an emotional event, such as an impending marriage or the illness of a family member, and as you reflect on these issues, you are distracted from the messages directed to you. One of those messages could well be critical to your responsibilities as a member of your organization and have implications for your future job security. All of us have been in this position at one time or another, and in the worst situations, we do need to explore the possibility of taking some time away from the job and our responsibilities. However, in the vast majority of cases, these reflections are momentary, occurring particularly if our minds are not focused on a project or particular endeavor at the time. We must learn to master such situations, focus on our tasks and responsibilities, and be productive and responsible employees.

Gender issues and conflicts can also cause us to be less productive. As we reflect on the way we are treated at work because of our gender, we may lose focus and not carry out our duties as expected. If our work environment includes exposure to sexual harassment, we can feel hyper-vigilant and remain in a constant state of distraction, waiting for the perpetrator to pass by our
desk or send us that unsolicited e-mail or smile. In spite of strong protective laws, many perpetrators learn to leave victims wondering if they have crossed the line to the extent that they should talk to a supervisor or HR about the situation. Such a situation rarely gets better without intervention and is a major factor in many resignations.

The number and types of internal distractions are infinite. Most likely, there is not a single day in a person’s working career without some recurring internal distractions. As employees, we must realize that these distractions are part of life and must be managed for our own benefit and security. Today, particularly with the variety of media at our fingertips, those distractions have the potential for becoming obsessions, which threaten interpersonal relationships, marriages, and even careers. This is our world today, and our only option for success is to learn to manage it with all of its many distractions.

**External Barriers (or Distractions)**

External barriers are so ubiquitous that they are not something we can avoid but rather something we must learn to manage. Every sensory avenue is vulnerable to external distractions, such as noise, temperature, odors, and glares, to the extent that every working day is a challenge in one way or another by a variety of unending external barriers. One of the most common external distractions today is the cell phone. Everyone has a cell phone, and people are constantly texting or reading/sending messages. People have lost their jobs over cell phone abuse and interruptions, and many businesses have developed policies and restrictions to keep cell phone distractions to a minimum during work hours.

One of the most extreme examples of the cell phone as an external barrier or distraction is the effect the cell phone has had on motor vehicle accidents. *USA Today* has reported that one in every four motor vehicle crashes today in the United States is directly related to the use of the cell phone (Kratsas, 2014).

External barriers can also include such things as the conduct of the people we work with. Hypothetically, let’s say that our supervisor closes the door and leaves us out of a discussion that we are normally a part of. Obviously, anyone would wonder whether or not his or her exclusion meant impending separation from the company, but in any event, such an act would generate anxiety and immediately affect our work and performance.

To an extent, working in a cubicle can be seen as an external barrier. In such an environment, one is constantly interrupted by telephones ringing and the conversations in the surrounding cubicles. While thousands every day carry out their work functions in such environments, they confront precisely the same barriers to their performance and, in most cases, have learned to deal with the multiple challenges of such a physical work environment.

The myriad of external barriers that we deal with daily not only at work but also in our everyday lives exacerbate our stress and can easily overwhelm us if we are not prepared to deal with them. Even though we make jokes about the numbers of barriers, especially the unique ones that occur, they pose physical and mental impediments to maintenance, security, and growth in an
environment that becomes more challenging in new and unexpected ways every day that we arrive at our jobs.

**Semantic Barriers (or Distractions)**

If each of us were to make a list of as many distractions as we could possibly think of, it is doubtful that any list would contain “words” as one of the many possibilities. However, as long as language has existed, words themselves have presented sometimes shocking barriers to communication, and they continue to do so every day.

One of the most interesting cases of a single word presenting a spectacular barrier occurred in the American Civil War in Virginia during what came to be called the Seven Days Battles for Richmond. Confederate General Longstreet missed an opportunity to block the retreat of the Union General McClellan and his forces because of a highly unusual spelling of a family name on the General’s map of the area. The word *Enroughty*, which appeared on his map, was actually pronounced *Darby*. So, naturally, although Longstreet was told to cut off McClellan’s retreat at the Darby House, he could not find it on his map because it was spelled *E N R O U G H T Y*. In this case, the opportunity for a very decisive Confederate victory that might well have affected the future of the Civil War was foiled by one very unusual word (Ware, 1956).

Words, in fact, are a constant threat to effective communication and continue to be the cause of political failure, legal action, and embarrassment on a regular basis. Unconsciously, people disparage others, insult friends, and constantly confess their own ignorance, and most of the time are never aware they have done so. The more one becomes aware of this barrier to communication, the better opportunity he or she has for managing it.

In 1775, Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s play *The Rivals* presented one of the most famous dramatic characters of all time in Mrs. Malaprop. This lady was fond of using words that sounded something like the ones she thought she was using but were not the correct usage of the words. Her mistaken words were so hilarious that similar vernacular blunders have been called “malapropisms” ever since. In a typical malapropism, the great Yogi Berra, speaking of the power of the state of Texas to affect a presidential election, once said “Texas has a lot of *electrical* votes.” Of course, he meant *electoral* votes. Most of us, of course, at one time or another have committed similar guffaws.

When we are distracted because of particular words in messages, we are distracted *semantically*. Someone may give a presentation about community living and use an offensive word. That word might distract an audience and cause them to stop listening to the message, their thoughts suddenly focused solely on the statement that the person made.

Semantic distractions also occur as derogatory tools used by those who would demean an individual or group. What we have to learn as part of our educational and experiential repertoire is that words have a variety of meanings and carry multiple tones. We create our own creditability or destroy it by our selection of words as we speak and write. If we are conscious of the vulnerabilities we risk every time we express ourselves, we take great care in the selection of words, look up those that we are not certain of before we use them, and perhaps avoid the foolish
embarrassment engendered by Mrs. Malaprop every time she bestowed her wisdom on those around her.

References


Check for Understanding
(Answer Key can be found below the Review)

1. Most people do not experience “barriers” to communication.
   a. True
   b. False

2. If you go to work knowing that you have court at 8:00 am the next morning, you might be said to have an “internal barrier or distraction” to your communications for the day.
   a. True
   b. False

3. A simple toothache cannot be described as an “internal barrier or distraction” to communication.
   a. True
   b. False

4. The weather is not something that is capable of providing an “external barrier or distraction” to communication.
   a. True
   b. False

5. Using an incorrect word every now and then cannot be seen as a “barrier or distraction” to communication.
   a. True
   b. False

Review

1. Three types of distractions are internal, external, and semantic.
2. Semantic distractions occur when people use words that interfere with your ability to listen to them further.
Answer Key

1. False: In fact, there are so many barriers to effective communication that it is a wonder we can communicate at all.
2. True: Although the degree of concern pending the charges might vary from person to person, it is very likely that thoughts of the pending court visit might very well affect your communications during the workday preceding the court date.
3. False: A severe or even moderate toothache is so debilitating that most people could focus very little on their work and communications in particular. Pain, fever, upset stomach, earache, and more take away so much from a person’s performance that he or she is better off not appearing on the job.
4. False: Very high temperatures, very cold temperatures, not to say an imminent threat of a tornado, hurricane, or earthquake, are certainly weather conditions that in virtually all cases would have a profound effect on communication.
5. False: Although subtle and something that a reader or hearer might not call attention to because of the potential embarrassment of the perpetrator, using the wrong word or words can very easily confound communication to the point of frustration and worse.