Overcoming Communication Barriers: Noise and Physical Barriers

*Noise is one of the most common barriers in communication. It is any persistent or random disturbance which reduces, obscures or confuses the clarity of a message. Physical barriers are closely related to noise as they can obstruct the communication transmission process.*

**Types of noise**

There are many forms of noise barriers which can occur during the communication process. Some examples are:

- physical interruptions by people
- interruption by technology, e.g. ringing telephone, new email, instant message, new Tweets, social media updates
- external noise e.g. distracting activities going on nearby such as traffic noise outside the building or conversations taking place in or near the room
- distortions of sound leading to delivery of incomplete messages, e.g. not hearing full words or phrases
- internal noise – physiological (e.g. blocked up ears), or psychological (e.g. distracting thoughts)
- the inclusion (in written communication) of irrelevant material or unsystematic approach to the subject matter

Noise creates *distortions of the message* and prevents it from being understood the way it was intended. Comprehension usually deteriorates when there is loud, intrusive noise which interferes with the communication assimilation process. The level of noise is very important. Generally, quiet background noise can easily be filtered out, whereas loud or intrusive noise cannot.

**Dealing with noise**

To overcome the noise barrier, the *source of the noise* must first be established. This may not be easy as the noise may be coming from a conversation in an adjacent room, or from traffic passing by the window. Once the source has been identified, steps can be taken to overcome it.

Anywhere along the process, noise can drown out the message. In *written work*, ensure that there is no superfluous material and that the subject is dealt with in a systematic and logical way. In the *physical environment*, try to eliminate as many possible distractions. This can include removing telephones and other technology from rooms, particularly those being used for presentation purposes. Make sure any *technology* that is being used works properly. For example, ensure microphones have no static or feedback which can distort the message; that any visual presentations are clearly visible; and that windows and doors are closed.

**Overcoming noise barriers**

- identify the source of the noise
- remove physical sources of distraction such as telephones or objects within the room
- close windows and doors
- ensure all technology works effectively
- omit irrelevant or wordy material from written documents
Noise can come from many sources. Environmental noise such as ringing telephones, honking horns, and messy, chaotic surroundings can prevent the message from being received clearly. Communicators who want their messages to be received clearly and accurately will remove as much environmental noise as possible. They try to present their message in a calm, distraction-free environment at a time when the receiver can devote his or her full attention to the message.

**Physical barriers**

Physical communication barriers usually relate to environmental factors which affect the communication process. With regard to the sender and the receiver, these barriers are neutral.

Environmental or physical barriers almost always occur at the beginning of the communication process. They are generally very obvious and, because they are neutral, pose no risk of offending either the message sender or receiver.

**Types of physical barrier**

Common examples of physical communication barriers are:

- ventilation and temperature
- seating and layout of furniture
- danger nearby
- lighting
- time and space

The size and shape of the room, the colour of the room, the lighting and heating can all impact upon behaviour in ways which are not necessarily immediately obvious. For example, harsh lighting can lead to eye strain, which can cause fatigue. This can make people feel unsettled and irritable and will be less open to communication. Similarly, listening is impaired when a room is either unpleasantly hot or cold.

**Overcoming physical barriers**

- Ensure that the room is well lit but not too bright. Make sure that if the sun is coming through the windows, there are no shadows or reflections on any overhead presentations and that it is not blinding the audience.
- If someone is expected to listen for a prolonged period of time, suitable seating and seating arrangements are important. Compact seating is more effective for groups and chairs should be comfortable.
- The room should have adequate ventilation. Optimum listening occurs when the room temperature is maintained at a comfortable level.
- Make sure the room is safe and there are no obstacles which may be dangerous to the audience.
- Wherever possible, avoid having physical barriers such as lecterns or tables between the sender and receiver. Removal of these barriers can give the impression of more open and personal communication.
- Email, fax, telephone, and videoconferencing can help to lessen the effects of time and space barriers, particularly for people who are communicating on a global scale.
- It may not always be possible to control the barrier (particularly in physical terms of time and space; or physiological and psychological noise), but even awareness of its existence by the sender or the receiver can go a long way to improving the flow of communication.