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## Barriers to business communication

By Lee Hopkins

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There are six crunching barriers to business communication:

1. Poor structure to the communication
2. A weak delivery
3. The use of the wrong medium to deliver the communication
4. A mixed message
5. The message is delivered to the wrong audience
6. A distracting environment

Let's consider each of these barriers to business communication in turn...

#### Poor structure to the communication

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The structure of a communication is an essential factor in how well a business communication is received by an audience.

It doesn't matter whether that audience is an audience of one or one million, good structure is essential if a communication is to be 'heard' amongst the advertising and marketing 'noise' of today's business environment.

So a poor structure to your message or delivery is therefore a major barrier to effective communication.

#### Weak delivery

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It doesn't matter how important or impressive the subject of your communication is, if you deliver it without any 'punch' you will not get as many people to take your desired action as you would like.

A weak delivery is like the very funny joke with the badly-told punchline --- it is not as funny or as memorable as you remember the original to be.

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It is important to not get confused between delivery and presenter. I know of one English businessman, Richard Branson, who is a shy and reticent public speaker. Yet I have seen audiences hang on his every word.

Branson may not be a powerful orator, but his message and its structure are very sound.

The use of the wrong medium

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You have to announce a temporary hold on non-essential stationery spending in your department. How do you communicate this?

Believe it or not, I know of one company who were seriously considering holding a major public meeting about this, with the department head having to get up in front of the entire department in the staff restaurant and explain why her staff couldn't order disposable fountain pens for a while.

I know of one group that were thinking of rolling out a small internal initiative via an expensive multi-media cd-rom, one to be given to each member of staff.

In the first case a simple memo would have sufficed; in the second a simple announcement on their intranet would equally have gotten the message across.

Similarly, an advertising campaign on local radio would be a highly ineffective way of reaching the desired audience if the message was complex and really intended for a narrow niche audience.

A public presentation, with 'obligatory' PowerPoint slideshow full of complex charts and data, would be the wrong medium if the message you were trying to communicate would be better served by a white paper, or some similar print-based format that allowed the audience to digest the complexities at their own pace.

A mixed message

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It is very hard for an audience -- whether an audience of 1 or 1 million -- to understand your communication if you unnecessarily obfuscate.

What?

If you deliberately, or otherwise, confuse them. A HUGE barrier to business communication is the ability of 'business-speak' to confuse and alienate its audience.

It does this in two ways:

1. By using terms and phrases that are 'jargon', the meaning of which are possibly recognised but probably not fully understood
2. By trying to 'save time/paper' by rolling several different communication messages into one.

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An example of the latter is where a business communication mentions, in the one communication, two or more completely separate events. Such as, for example, a memo that talks about what management expect you to do to conform to the latest departmental stationery budget cuts alongside an events list of the up-coming staff picnic.

Another barrier arising from mixed messages is when a previously-held stance is lightly overturned to meet some political or business expediency, then upheld again.

An example of this would be where the acceptance of corporate gifts is not allowed, but then allowed if it a brand new client who has contracted a large amount of money to your business, then not allowed again after the gift-giving and receiving season is over.

Or a company-wide budget cut that stops all business-class travel, but the very senior management are found to be travelling first class.

Be very careful of mixing your messages, as mixed messages are a very real barrier to effective business communication.

The wrong audience

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I once attended a conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, of the British Psychological Society.

Fortunate to have been presenting a paper there, I was nevertheless distracted by the very large number of other presenters, many of whom were presenting papers that, on reading their paper's titles in the Proceedings, looked really interesting.

With a couple of hours to spare before I was due to present, I picked what appeared to be an interesting presentation, and sauntered casually into the lecture room.

So you can imagine my dismay when I found, about five minutes into the presentation, that the title was a 'trick' title, a play-on-words by the author that no doubt struck him as funny and clever, but struck me as dastardly.

As Robert Cialdini would say, the presenter was a 'smuggler' of influence. That is, he used a 'hot' topic of the day to entice an audience in, only to then present to them something that had VERY little relevance to that 'hot' topic.

I was not alone (and not the first) in walking out of the lecture theatre and heading for a 'second choice' presentation (which, incidentally, I did thoroughly enjoy!)

I also remember a very large and cumbersome booklet being left on my desk overnight by a then employer. The booklet went to great lengths to inform me of the latest company initiatives in a particular HR area. Whilst the time and expense the company went to to create and publish the booklet was considerable, the actual initiative itself affected perhaps less than a fifth of the total employees in the company. Even then, from talking to colleagues in that 'fifth' group, I doubted that more than a few

of the fifth would have been interested in it, too.

The company had its own intranet (it was one of the pioneers in the computing industry) before business really understood the power and potential of internet publishing, so it could have just as easily and far more cheaply just emailed everyone with a link to specially-written pages on their intranet.

But these were the days when it was the IT department that controlled access to and publishing on the intranet, not individual business groups.

At least these days the HR Department could have published their own webpages on the intranet and sent an email out to individually affected employees.

Presenting your message to the wrong audience for your business communication is a complete waste of your time and money. Don't do it — pick your audience then pick the medium that will best find them.

#### A distracting environment

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There's nothing worse than trying to communicate your message to a group of people who cannot 'hear' you.

Whether their inability to 'hear' you is because of:

- \* your voice not being strong enough
- \* too many others talking in the room at the same time
- \* police and ambulance sirens outside the venue
- \* too many phone calls coming in to their office while they're trying to read your memo
- \* interruptions while they try to read your report
- \* incoming emails keep popping up while they are reading your web-based communication
- \* their minds are full of other pressing matters
- \* they are supposed to be somewhere else at that moment
- \* their mobile phone keeps ringing, or vibrating if they've set it to 'silent' instead of switching it off
- \* their internet connection is slow
- \* their internet connection keeps dropping out
- \* there are too many interesting people to look at
- \* the room's airconditioning is not working and the room is hot and stuffy
- \* the room's heating is not working and the room is cold and clammy

Well, there are of course a thousand possible distracting reasons why they cannot or will not attend to your business communication.

The point is to do whatever you can, whilst acknowledging that this might be next to nothing, to reduce the number of distractions your chosen audience might be subjected to.

In closing...

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The barriers to effective business communication are many, but with care and attention the majority of them can be overcome.

The fewer the barriers, the greater the chance that your business communication will be heard, understood and your MDA ('Most Desired Action' you wish them to take) will actually occur.

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### **Cross Cultural Communication needs...**

#### **By Neil Payne**

Within the business context, cross cultural communication refers to interpersonal communication and interaction across different cultures. This has become an important issue in our age of globalisation and internationalisation. Effective cross cultural communication is concerned with overcoming cultural differences across nationality, religion, borders, culture and behaviour.

Cross cultural communication is critical to the business world. The diversity of people in cities and countries means an element of cross cultural communication will always be needed whether it is between staff, colleagues, customers or clients. Awareness of cultural differences can favourably impact the success of a business. Improved staff interaction, better customer relations and effective client management are all areas that will reap benefits through cross cultural understanding.

Although cross cultural communication competency can only be truly achieved through cross cultural awareness training, language acquisition, foreign travel and cultural immersion there are some guidelines that can enhance your cross cultural communication skills.

#### **Cross Cultural Communication needs ...Listening Skills**

Although emphasis usually lies on being a competent speaker, listening is a key skill that many business personnel do not exercise enough. For cross cultural communication, attentive listening is critical to be able to understand meanings, read between the lines and enable to empathise with the speaker.

#### **Cross Cultural Communication needs...Speaking Skills**

Listening and speaking must work in tandem for effective cross cultural communication. Speaking well

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is not about accent, use of grammar and vocabulary or having the gift of the gab. Rather, cross cultural communication is enhanced through positive speech such as encouragement, affirmation, recognition and phrasing requests clearly or expressing opinions sensitively.

### Cross Cultural Communication needs... Observation

Large amounts of cross cultural information can be read in people's dress, body language, interaction and behaviour. Be aware of differences with your own culture and try to understand the roots of behaviours. Asking questions expands your cross cultural knowledge.

### Cross Cultural Communication needs... Patience

Man has been created differently and we need to recognise and understand that sometimes cross cultural differences are annoying and frustrating. In these situations patience is definitely a virtue. Through patience respect is won and cross cultural understanding is enhanced.

### Cross Cultural Communication needs ...Flexibility

Flexibility, adaptability and open-mindedness are the route to successful cross cultural communication. Understanding, embracing and addressing cross cultural differences leads to the breaking of cultural barriers which results in better lines of communication, mutual trust and creative thinking.

Following these five cross cultural communication needs will allow for improved lines of communication, better cross cultural awareness and more successful cross cultural relationships.

Neil Payne is Director of London based cross cultural communication consultancy

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