

Roadblocks to Communication

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Communication is the meeting of meanings among people. If there is no real convergence of meanings, there is no real communication. Unfortunately, meaning barriers exist among all people, making communication much more difficult than most people seem to realize.

It is false to assume that if one can talk, one can communicate.

So much of our education misleads students, friends, relatives, professionals, customers and suppliers into thinking that communication is easier than it is. The result is that people become discouraged and give up when they run into difficulties. They don't know what to do because they don't understand the nature of the problem, and have not learned its fundamental skills.

The wonder is not that communicating is as difficult as it is, but that it occurs as much as it does.

In a beautiful book by Reuel L. Howe, **The Miracle of Dialogue**, the author makes the empirical point that, even though, there is a strong desire in all humans for effective communication without realizing it; people typically inject communication barriers into their conversations. It has been estimated that these barriers are used over 90% of the time when one or both parties of the conversation has a problem to be dealt with or a need to be fulfilled.

Communication barriers are high risk responses whose impact on communication is frequently (though not inevitable!) negative. These roadblocks are more likely to be destructive when one or more persons who are interacting are under stress. The destructive roadblocks of communication are many and varied, and the majority of the people are not aware of them. They often diminish the other's self-esteem and trigger defense mechanism such as resistance and resentment. They can lead to dependency, withdrawal, feelings of defeat or inadequacy. They decrease the likelihood that the other will find solution to the problem. It reduces the possibility that the other will constructively express true feelings.

Communication roadblocks carry a high risk of fostering negative results and their repeated use can cause permanent damage to a relationship.

The challenge is to learn about the specific barriers that hinder any conversation. Thomas Gordon, in his book **Parent Effectiveness Training: The No- Lose Program for Raising Responsible Children** has devised a comprehensive list of the dirty dozen communication spoilers. They fully apply to organizational, management and professional setting.

The negative behaviors include:

1. **Criticizing:** Making negative evaluation of the other person, his/her actions, or attitudes. “You brought it on yourself, you have got nobody to blame for the mess you are in”.
2. **Name-calling:** Putting down, stereotyping, and stigmatizing the other person. “What a stupid, just like a jerk, Egghead, Your hardhats are all alike. You are just another dumb and insensitive person”.
3. **Diagnosing:** Analyzing why the person is behaving as he/she is, playing the amateur and not educated psychiatrist. “I can read you like a book. You are doing that just to irritate me. Just because you went to college, you think you are better than other people.”
4. **Praising Evaluative:** Making a positive evaluation of the other person, her actions or attitudes. “You are always such a good girl; I know you will help me with the dishes tonight.” Of course, that healthy recognition and acknowledgement is very necessary, but repeated use of these behaviors can be detrimental to any relationship.
5. **Ordering:** Commanding the other person to do what you want to have done. “Do this task right now. Why? Because I said so...”
6. **Threatening:** Trying to control the other’s action by warning of negative consequences that you will undertake. “You’ll do it or else...” “Stop what you are doing right now or you are fired.”
7. **Moralizing:** Telling the other person what he/she should do and preaching to others all the time. “You should always be in my side; you ought to tell him that you are sorry”.
8. **Excessive / Inappropriate Questioning:** Closed-ended questions are frequently barriers in a relationship. These are those that can usually be answered in a few words, often with a simple yes or no. “When did it happen? Are you sorry that you did it?”
9. **Advising:** Giving the other person a solution to her problems. “If I were you, I will sure tell him/her off, that is an easy one to solve...”
10. **Diverting:** Putting the other person aside through distraction. “Don’t dwell on it; let’s talk about something more pleasant. That is the way it is, let me tell you what happened to me”.

11. **Logical Argument:** Attempting to convince the other with an appeal to facts and logic, usually without consideration of the emotional factors involved. “Look at the facts and make a decision.”

12. **Reassuring:** Trying to stop the other person from feeling the negative emotions she is experiencing. “Don’t worry; it is always darkest before the dawn. It will all work out ok at the end.”

These twelve ways of responding are viewed as high risk responses, rather than inevitably elements of all communication. Indeed, there are times when people use these responses with little or no obvious negative effects.

If one or two persons are experiencing a strong need or wrestling with a difficult and complex problem, the likelihood of negative impact from roadblocks increases dramatically.

The twelve barriers to communication can be divided into three mayor categories:

1. **Judging** (criticizing, name-calling, diagnosing, praising evaluative)
2. **Sending solutions** (ordering, threatening, moralizing, excessive / inappropriate questioning, advising)
3. **Avoiding the other’s concern** (diverting, logical argument, reassuring).

The major barrier to interpersonal communication lies in our very natural tendency to judge and to approve or disapprove statements of the other person. This barrier generates another one, which is that of **guilt, remorse and regret.**

Roadblocks are prevalent in all organizational cultures. They are present in conversations where people have a problem or a strong need. This bad behavior can be corrected through formal training and education.

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