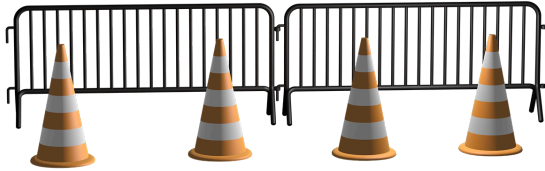## 2.6 b) Barriers to communication (AO2)

"There is no communication that is so simple that it cannot be misunderstood."
- Luigina Sgarro, Italian management consultant, psychologist, and author

"90% of all management problems are caused by miscommunication."
- Dale Carnegie (1888 - 1955), American author and entrepreneur

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Barriers to communication refer to the various factors that can prevent information being transferred effectively or accurately. These hurdles can also cause messages to be misinterpreted or misunderstood. The main barriers to communication can be categorised as:

- **Language barriers**
- **Cultural barriers**
- **Physical barriers**
- **Technological barriers**
- **Organizational barriers**
- **Psychological and perceptual barriers**
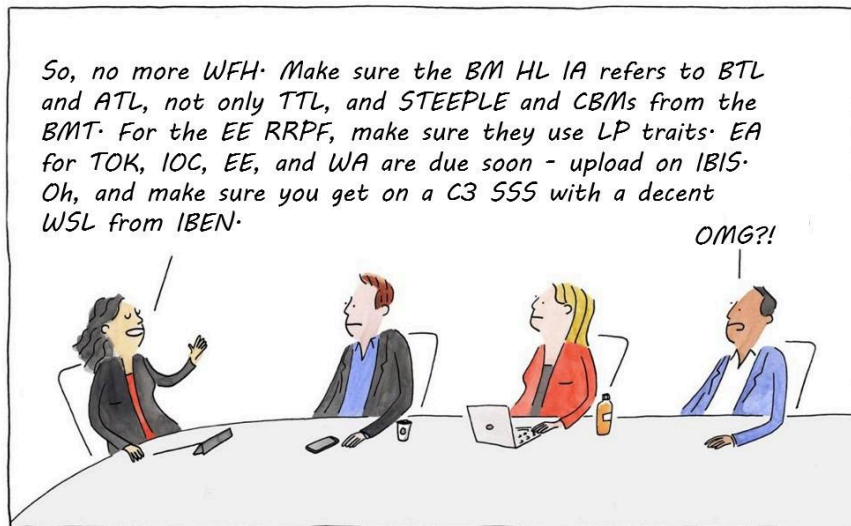
Case Study - Communication mishaps

Effective communication is vital for successful leadership, but even Presidents can get this wrong at times. Here is a short list of communication mishaps from President George W. Bush, the 43rd president of the US (2001 - 2009).

- *"The vast majority of our imports come from outside the country."*
- *"If you're struggling to put food on your family."*
- *"I know that humans and fish can co-exist peacefully."*
- *"If we don't succeed, we run the risk of failure."*
- *"We have the best workforce in America."*
- *"One word sums up probably the responsibility of any Governor: 'to be prepared'"*
- *"It isn't pollution that's harming the environment. It's the impurities in our air and water that are doing it."*

1. Language barriers

So, no more WFH. Make sure the BM HL IA refers to BTL and ATL, not only TTL, and STEEPLE and CBMs from the BMT. For the EE RRPF, make sure they use LP traits. EA for TOK, IOC, EE, and WA are due soon – upload on IBIS. Oh, and make sure you get on a C3 SSS with a decent WSL from IBEN.

OMG?!

Language barriers can cause major miscommunications and misunderstandings, such as difficulties related to translation of languages, tones, written language, jargon, slang, dialects, and accents. Even when referring to the same language, these barriers can still exist (see Box 1 below), leading to misinterpretations and misconceptions and hence unintended consequences.

2. Cultural barriers

"Think like a wise man but communicate in the language of the people."
- William Butler Yeats (1865 - 1939), Irish poet

Cultural barriers to communication stem from differences in social norms, beliefs, and values in different communities and countries. In a corporate context, this could be due to a lack of awareness or understanding of different business etiquette in other cultures. What is considered to be the social norm or culturally acceptable in one country is not necessarily the case in other parts of the world. A lack of cultural knowledge and a low cultural quotient can lead to all sorts of communication problems.

3. Physical barriers

"The two words 'information' and 'communication' are often used interchangeably, but they signify quite different things."
- Johnny H. Tan, American entrepreneur and award-winning author

Physical barriers in the workplace and the broader corporate world can also cause communication problems. Examples of physical barriers to communication include:

- Physical distance is a common barrier to communication, such as people having to meet in a physical location to discuss a business venture or commercial contract. This will entail time (travel) and costs for the business. Proximity can be important for effective communications.
- Time zone differences exist, even for people who work remotely. Employees and managers often find themselves having to have virtual meetings with teams that may be located hundreds or even thousands of miles away, which can cause communication issues.
- Physical evidence such as closed office doors, barrier screens, and separate facilities for people of different status (such as reserved car parking spaces, catering, and toilets) can create a "them and us" culture in which employees feel detached from senior management.

Physical evidence can be a barrier to communication in the workplace

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4. Technological barriers

"Although we live in an information technology age, we often find ourselves in failure to communicate situations."
- Johnny H. Tan, American entrepreneur and award-winning author

Poor Internet connectivity is a technological barrier to communication

Technological barriers to communication are caused by people not having the right technologies and tools to communicate effectively. This could be due to a lack of finance to invest in the latest information communication technologies and/or workers not having the right training to use these effectively. Examples include:

- Outdated computer hardware, machinery, and equipment.
- Out of date software programmes that are prone to cyberattacks and viruses.
- Technological failures, such as software crashes or poor Internet connectivity.

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5. Organizational barriers

Organizational barriers to communication are caused by a lack of understanding of the internal functions and structures of the business, as well as the individual roles within the organization. Such barriers can affect businesses of all sizes and arise because workers are unaware of, or do not fully understand, existing internal structures and procedures. This is a common barrier to communication for new recruits, but can also apply to any worker within the organization. For example, evidence of the existence of organizational barriers include:

- Workers frequently contact the wrong individual in the organization for specific information.
- Important messages, data, and information are lost or delayed somewhere in the **chain of command**. This is more likely to occur in large organizations with tall hierarchical structures.
- Employees do not know how and where to or request information nor do they know how to share information.
- Grapevine communication (informal channels of communication) that cause result in gossip, misperceptions, and misinterpretations of messages and information.

6. Psychological and perceptual barriers

"Say a little and say it well."
- Irish proverb

"Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply."
- Stephen R. Covey (1932 - 2012), American educator, author, and businessman

Psychological barriers (or emotional barriers) are caused by individuals with contrasting and conflicting mindsets, opinions, or priorities. The source of the problem is that people often see the world differently and interpret different events in contrasting ways

Although disagreements and **conflict in the workplace** are inevitable, they can cause serious problems for a business if the situations are not managed, making communication extremely difficult. Examples of psychological and perceptual barriers include:

- A lack of trust within and between teams.
- Low staff morale as workers feel unheard, unsupported, and undervalued.
- Bitterness and unfriendly rivalry within the workforce.
- Cases of harassment, exclusion, and even bullying in the workplace.

In all of the above cases, the barriers to communication, whatever the source, need to be tackled by senior managers to ensure there are effective communications. Without doing so, the business is likely to struggle to remain productive, efficient, and competitive. As communicated by Shiv Khera (b.1961), Indian author and motivational speaker, *"Avoid miscommunication. The price you pay for it is horrendous."* He suggests that managers can apply the 4Cs of effective communication: clear, concise, correct, and complete.

Key terms

Barriers to communication refers to the various factors that can prevent information being transferred effectively or accurately.

Cultural barriers to communication are the obstacles to effective communications stem from differences in social norms, beliefs, and values in different communities and countries.

Language barriers to communication are the obstacles to effective communications that stem from miscommunications and misunderstandings due to language issues such as tones, jargon, slang, dialects, and accents.

Organizational barriers to communication are obstacles to effective communications caused by a lack of understanding of the internal functions and structures of the business, as well as the individual roles within the organization.

Psychological barriers to communication are obstacles to effective communications caused by individuals who have contrasting and conflicting mindsets, opinions, or priorities.