



Aalto University
School of Business

Communication barriers

Organizational Communication, Pekka Pälli 25.9.2020

Agenda & objective

- **Mapping the common barrier types**
- **Getting insights on how to overcome (at least understand) communication barriers**



Would you
please throw
me that
frisbee?



THROW IT
NOW I'M
TELLING
YOU

Flying shepherd girl catching frisbee...



The sources of barriers – according to the transfer model

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Why errors may occur</i>
Sender: idea	Ideas may not be clearly formulated before coding and transmission begins. For example, you may want to dispute a decision but you haven't thought about alternative ways forward.
Sender: coding	You don't have the right vocabulary to express your thoughts. You use overly complex language or jargon that the receiver cannot understand.
Transmission: medium	The medium may modify the message. For example, if you communicate by telephone or in writing, the receiver cannot use your non-verbal signals to help interpret your message.
Transmission: environment	The environment can distort the message. For example, noise on a telephone line could distort a message. Things happening around the sender or receiver (e.g. other people speaking, coming into the room, etc.) may distract them from the message.
Receiver: decoding	Decoding may distort the message. The receiver may not hear the correct words, or may read written communications too quickly and misunderstand the message.
Receiver: idea	The receiver's perceptions may distort the message. For example, their beliefs or mindset based on previous experience may create a barrier so that they don't listen to the message.

Where and why barriers to communication lie?

- Coding and decoding process (and the medium/channel (transmission))
- Perceptions and predispositions
- Context
- Language
- Culture

Perceptions and predispositions

- Stereotyping (seeing the other person through over-generalization, as a representative of a category)
- Assumptions about other person's intentions and values
- Assuming that the audience has the knowledge or capacity to understand the message
- Perceived status, e.g. if we think that the person we're communicating with is of much higher or lower status than we are

Context

- Physical context/environment causing **physical barriers**:
 - Interference – distractions, noise, problems with technology
 - Discomfort – physical circumstances which affect concentration such as being too hot or too cold, feeling ill, etc.
- Emotional context causing **emotional barriers**
 - E.g. a person feeling angry, can affect the atmosphere in a meeting and distort messages.

Language

- Language barrier generally: inability to share ideas in common language
- More specific language barriers:
 - Jargon: technical terminology and idioms used by specific communities of practice (many professions rely heavily on jargon and have their own 'language' that is impenetrable to outsiders). Not knowing or being familiar with jargon or “lingo” of the field may hinder participation or appropriate contributions
 - Acronyms and abbreviations: although these can form an useful shorthand, they exclude receivers who are not familiar with their meaning
 - Semantics and pragmatics that are (often) related to culture

Culture

- Noticeable cultural differences in the ways that people
 - Greet each other: for example, in some cultures kiss is “a must” while others settle for a briefest of handshake
 - Use and interpret gestures
 - Use and interpret speech acts (questions, requests, commands, apologies etc.)
 - Use personal space (proxemics): for example, in general northern Europeans are less comfortable with touching than e.g. southern Europeans, or people from the Middle East.
 - Interact and are expected to interact verbally: for example, Americans may value direct verbal interaction and ‘straight speaking’ whereas the Japanese value spiral logic and indirect verbal interaction.

Culture, cont'd

Women and men socialized differently (Deborah Tannen, author of e.g. "You Just Don't Understand. Men and women in conversation". See too Tannen (1995) Power of Talk, in *Harvard Business Review*)

This results in "cultural differences" in linguistic styles, such as:

- Men sensitive to power dynamics, so they speak in ways that position them as one-up position by others, whereas women tend to react to the rapport dynamics more strongly (thus saving face for others)
- Confidence and boasting: psychological research has shown that women are more likely to downplay their certainty, whereas men are more likely to minimize their doubts
- Asking questions: men try to avoid asking questions as they are attentive to the fact that asking questions may put them in a one-down positions
- Women use more compliments, not always meaning them literally (men take them more literally). Same is with apologies.
- Indirectness: men likely to be more indirect when it comes to e.g. admitting a fault, women more indirect when it comes to telling others what to do

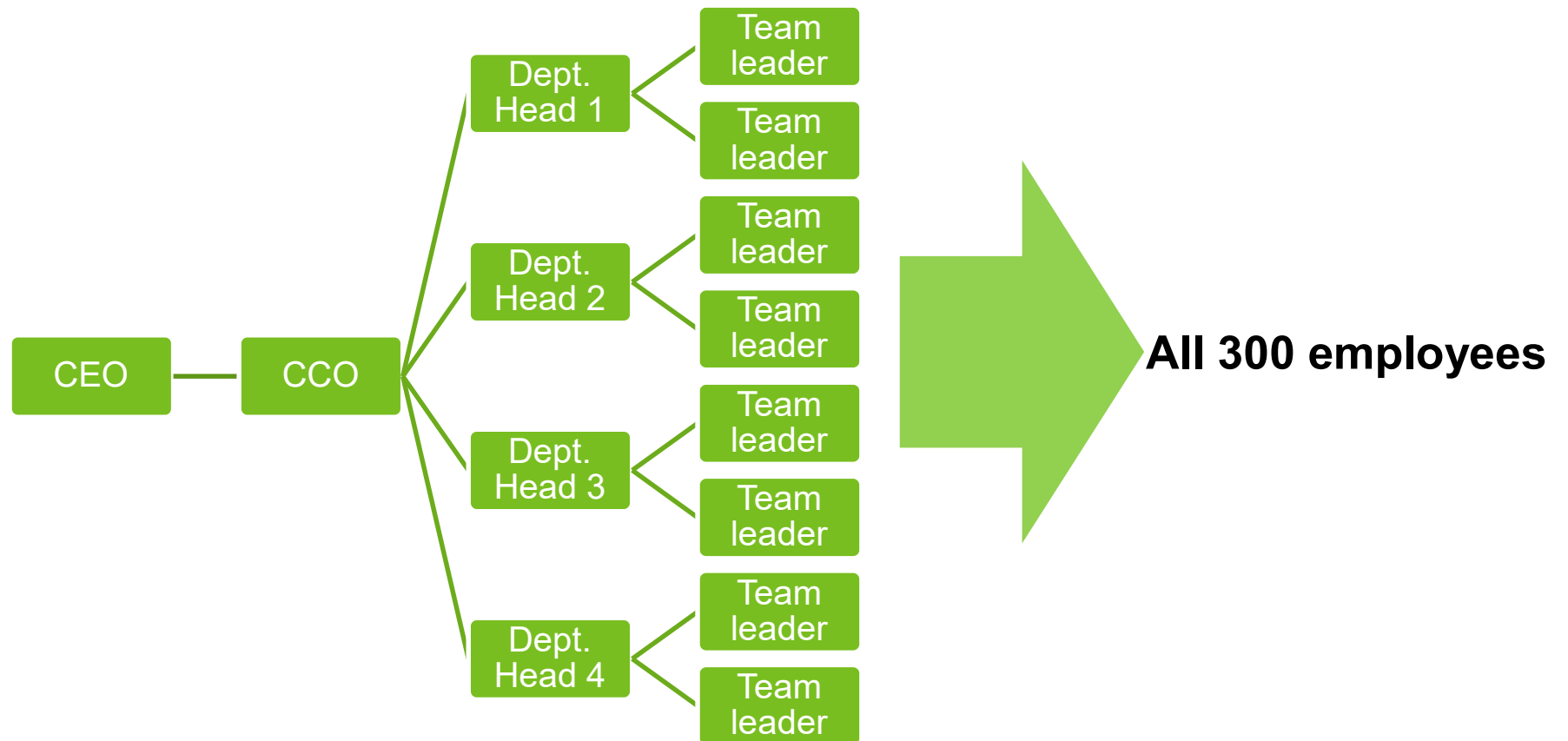


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How to overcome the barriers to communication – or reduce the risks of miscommunication?

Some most common pieces of advice for managerial communication

- Be clear in your own mind about what you want to communicate.
- Select the right medium and use it appropriately.
- Step into the receiver's shoes and anticipate the impact of your communication.
- Use feedback to encourage two-way communication and check understanding.
- If you want to influence, communicate directly, preferably face-to-face so that you can use non-verbal signals.
- Limit the number of links in the communication chain.



Exercise on overcoming communication barriers

Think about a conversation or any communicational event you have been involved recently. Try to come up with an example incident – an interactional situation between individual persons or a group of people – where there was a barrier in communication. You should have been the one “sending the message”.

Reflect on the communication and identify the barriers that may have led to distortion. And, what could have been done to overcome the barrier(s)?

Example table

Communication I was involved in	Communication channel	Barriers and why the barrier occurred?
Informing team about new efficiency targets that will be rolled out over the next three months	Presentation to group of six team members	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Technology/medium (voice quality in Zoom was poor)- Assumption that all team members were familiar with old efficiency targets (turned out to be a wrong assumption)Etc.