



Aalto University
School of Business

Communication barriers

Organizational Communication, Pekka Pälli 11.11.2022

Agenda & objective

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

A close-up photograph of a German Shepherd dog sitting in a snowy environment. The dog has a black and tan coat and is looking directly at the camera with a calm expression. A white, cloud-shaped thought bubble is positioned near the dog's head, containing the text "Would you please throw me that frisbee?".

Would you
please throw
me that
frisbee?



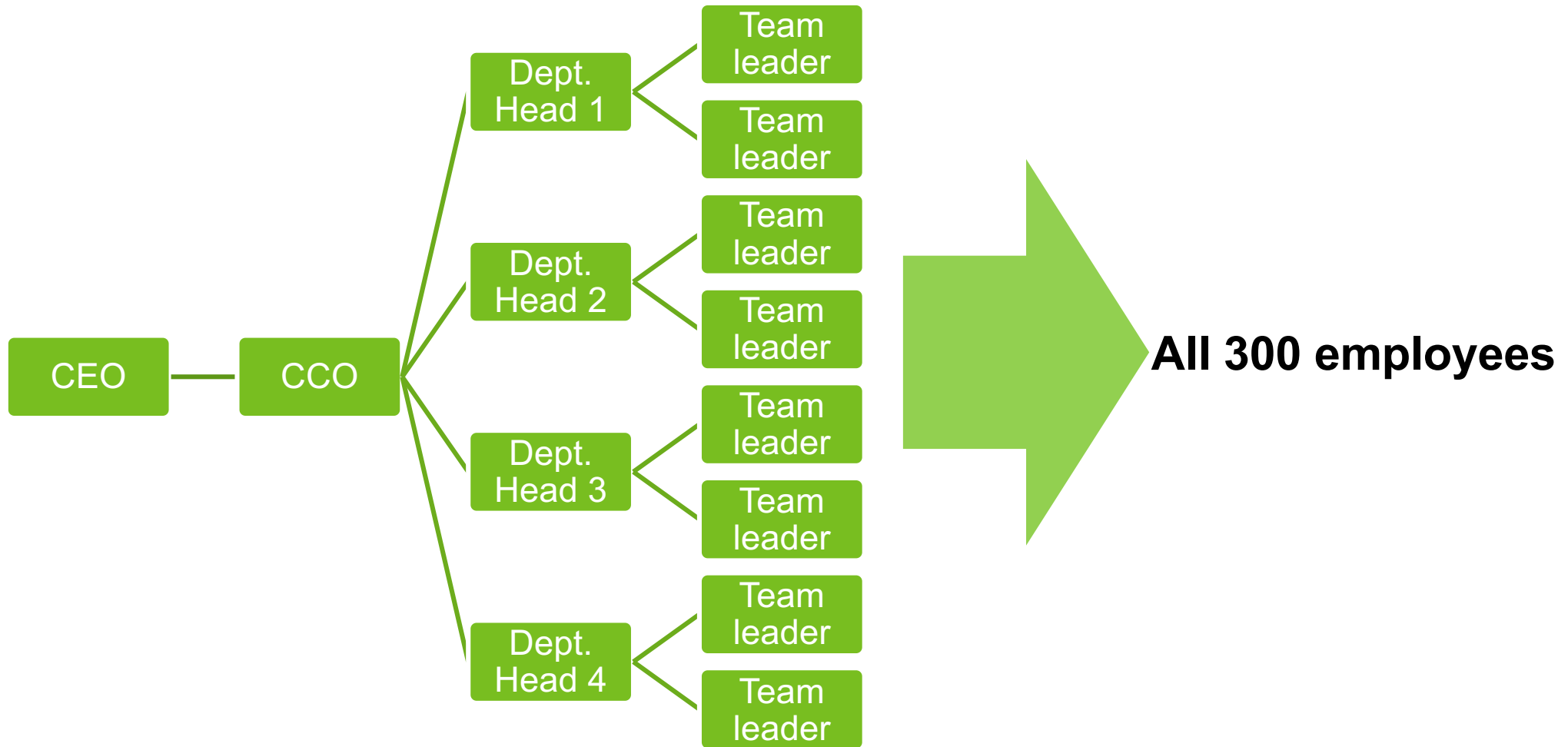
THROW IT
NOW I'M
TELLING
YOU

Where and why barriers to communication lie?

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

Organizational structure

- Complex structure with many management levels may distort messages, causing also delays in communication
- Structures where employees and management are distant from each other form barriers
- Structures where e.g. teams, units, and departments work in silos result in distance which creates barriers



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.

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 (or the other way around)
- 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. emotional states (such as being angry, happy etc.) may have an effect on the sender or receiver (distorting the message)

Language

- Language barrier generally: inability to share ideas in common language
- Linguistic styles (even within the speakers of the same language) differ, thus affecting the interpretation
- More specific language barriers:
 - Jargon: 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

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, North Americans may value direct verbal interaction and ‘straight speaking’ whereas the Japanese tend to 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?

**The number one thing for everyone to understand:
Misunderstandings and message alterations or
distortions are the default values in
communication between people**

**Yet, that is why we are humans and why we
evolve...**

”Wiio’s laws” – (O. Wiio, 1970’s)

Communication usually fails, except by accident

- If communication can fail, it will.
- If communication cannot fail, it still most usually fails.
- If communication seems to succeed in the intended way, there's a misunderstanding.
- If you are content with your message, communication certainly fails.
- If a message can be interpreted in several ways, it will be interpreted in a manner that maximizes the damage.
- There is always someone who knows better than you what you meant with your message.
- The more we communicate, the worse communication succeeds.
- The more we communicate, the faster misunderstandings propagate.



How to cope with the unavoidable distortion in communication

- **Start with acknowledging it**
- **Understand that trust and relationships have a vital influence how your messages come across**
 - Why some people understand each other so well? Certainly not because of their apt and skillful communication but because of their relationship
- **Make use of it**
 - As “a sender”, you don’t always have to expect a correct interpretation of your communication (as if there would even be a correct interpretation), and you as “a receiver” don’t have to search for the correct interpretation

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.

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 via Zoom	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Technology/medium (some group members had technical issues, e.g. one was in a bus, one was at home and her baby crying...)- Assumption that all team members were familiar with old efficiency targets (turned out to be a wrong assumption)Etc.