

# Overcoming Communication Barriers through Power Talk in Company Culture

Cristina Mihaela Zamfir

“Ovidius” University of Constanta, Faculty of Letters, Romania

[cristina\\_m\\_zamfir@yahoo.com](mailto:cristina_m_zamfir@yahoo.com)

## Abstract

*It is well-known that communication can be both unifying and divisive. The paper is designed with three purposes in mind. First, it takes us through the most frequent obstacles to effective communication which are likely to affect interpersonal and intercultural business relationships. Second, it aims to describe the array of barriers which have a delaying and distorting effect on communication. Third, it analyzes ways of refining our communication skills in order to become more flexible in unblocking miscommunication.*

*The results emphasize that power talkers should use certain strategies to make their points of view more emphatic and increase their flexibility through strong/positive language and opinions.*

**Key words:** business relationships, communication barriers, company culture, power talk

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## 1. Introduction

The process of leading and managing does not take place in a vacuum, but it happens in a controlled working environment which can be permanently exposed to *communication barriers*.

Moreover, the borderline between organizational and personal barriers is very thin and can only be overcome by best practice in coaching, active listening while making the employees feel valued and confident. In other words, the use of some basic strategies as a defence mechanism will help to thoroughly examine the costs and benefits of our actions (Robbins, 2005; Barker, 2006; Chaney and Martin, 2007; Pardey, 2007). Communication can be both unifying and divisive. Business common interests tie people together, yet different styles of approaching work can cause problems.

To this end, power of influence and state control are major components offering a number of techniques for increasing flexibility in the workplace by developing excellent state management skills.

Thus, the focus will be on the principle of flexibility (Dilts and DeLozier, 2000; O'Connor and Seymour, 2002; Ellerton, 2006) and power talk (Johnson and Barrall, 2006) with important implications for managing organizations and social systems.

## 2. Theoretical background

Barker (2006), Chaney and Martin (2007) provide a synthetic description of the most frequent *obstacles to effective communication*. Below I shall reproduce Chaney and Martin's (2007, p.12) communication barriers which affect interpersonal and intercultural relationships:

- *Physical* – time, environment, comfort and needs, and physical medium (e.g., telephone, letter);
- *Cultural* – ethnic, religious, and social differences;
- *Perceptual* – viewing what is said from your own mindset;
- *Motivational* – the listener's mental inertia;
- *Experimental* – lack of similar life happenings;
- *Emotional* – personal feelings of the listener;
- *Linguistic* – different languages spoken by the speaker and listener or use of a vocabulary beyond the comprehension of the listener;

- *Nonverbal* – non-word messages;
- *Competition* – the listener’s ability to do other things rather than hear the communication.

Barker’s (2006) approach is more oriented towards the technique of asking pertinent questions to encourage the listeners to think for themselves and resolve the situations which they see as highly problematic. At this stage, the skills of coaching and counselling intermingle to effectively turn an obstacle (barrier) into a goal and make people take ownership of the problems when they have no desire to: ”Look reality coolly in the face. Be objective; avoid judgement. Instead of describing past performance, for example, as ‘bad’ or ‘inadequate’, focus on the specific aspects of it that need improvement” (Barker, 2006, p. 86).

In the same line of approach, Funakawa (1997) posits the question of *cultural iceberg*, i.e. a cultural model of ‘waterline’ and surface values, which can also become a barrier to our ability to communicate successfully: ”The values that are below the <<waterline>> represent those on which behaviors are based; however, we respond to the surface values that we can sense. To truly understand a culture, we must explore the behaviors below the waterline. The common elements of trust, sincerity, and integrity are necessary to building successful business relationships when cultural differences exist” (Funakawa, 1997 quoted in Chaney and Martin, 2007, pp. 12-13).

On the other hand, Pardey (2007) establishes *five* possible *reasons* why managers can underperform. He uses the abstract notions of *lack* and *fear* in conjunction with *time*, *skills*, *employees*, *risk*, or *performance*:

- *lack of time* (this describes an authoritarian organization, where managers rule and command in a dictatorial style. They are far from being familiarized with the concept of coaching and often feel uneasy about. They want things done here and now);
- *fear of the skills used in coaching* (this is related to the ‘lack of time’ barrier; managers feel deeply uncertain, weak and insecure when referring to the idea of coaching);
- *fear of employees* (this describes managers who are fearful and scared of their higher skilled subordinates, and who might feel handicapped by their incapacity to lead by example);
- *fear of risk* (managers may feel uncertain whether the organizational training programs will produce the expected results and, as such, avoid taking the risk);

e.g. Embarking upon this new venture/reform programme *is not worth the risk*.

- *unwillingness to recognize difficult performance issues* (this describes managers who are reluctant to face an underperformance problem, in the hope that it will go unnoticed. First, it would mean to recognize and assume full responsibility and then, if work attitude and results do not improve, to be forced to make drastic changes).

Defining clear outcomes is essential for business success. Once the outcome principle is achieved, thoughts of failure are not welcome. Based on the principle ‘*There’s no failure only feedback*’ (O’Connor and Seymour, 2002; Ellerton, 2006; Cooper, 2008), the language of business has a strong focus on verbs such as *succeed* or *fail*, *win* or *lose* and a lot of business talk centres around *succeeding* or *failing*, *winning* or *losing*.

### 3. Research methodology

This research has concentrated on offering an insight into the array of barriers which have a delaying and distorting effect on communication, on the one hand, and suggested some basic techniques to act with greater flexibility in dominating an interaction, on the other. The emphasis was placed on both the aspects of blocking workplace communication and the solutions for making strong arguments by using certain words and phrases.

The research methodology has aimed to highlight different thinking styles which may lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations, and the various factors that make business people sound more powerful when they talk.

In this case, the paper has provided examples of emphatic language like using appropriate signals to focus attention, building sentences around key words, or building sentences using specific linguistic patterns, as well as examples of power talking such as using positive language, speaking firmly, avoiding tentative opinions, or getting straight to the point.

In company culture, research has shown that choosing an appropriate communication style highly depends on the purpose, the situation and the audience. The way business people stress words or make pauses in sentences makes their discourse more interesting and easier for the audience to follow. Interest in acquiring a greater flexibility of behaviour and using a firm tone is generated by the necessity of having more choices in order to have the guarantee of controlling the situation.

## 4. Findings

The results of the paper can be structured around two communication axes, i.e. highlighting a number of barriers to effective communication (*filtering, selective perception, information overload, gender styles, emotions, language*) and sounding more powerful in communication (by using *strong/emphatic words* and *power talk*).

### 4.1. The array of barriers with a delaying and distorting effect on communication

Robbins' (2005) study on *Essentials of Organizational Behaviour* offers additional insight into the array of barriers which have a delaying and distorting effect on communication:

*Filtering* usually occurs when employees deliberately select that information which satisfies or pleases their bosses. Thus, they act on the content of the message in a manipulative way and would not say anything that could impede the relationship with their superior. The point is that these jobholders value their position and job security a great deal. This tends to explain why they never deviate from norms, always play by rules and eventually expect to be rewarded in the long term through promotion: “You can expect some filtering to occur wherever there are status differences. Factors like fear of conveying bad news and the desire to please one’s boss often lead employees to tell their superiors what they think those superiors want to hear, thus distorting upward communications” (Robbins, 2005, p. 148).

*Selective perception* demonstrates that our map of the world is not reality, but an interpretation of it. We give meaning to the environment through our sensory impressions, the communication process being strongly influenced by personal characteristics such as motives, interests, needs, expectations, attitudes: “Employees naturally organize and interpret what they see; inherent in this process is the potential for perceptual distortion” (Robbins, 2005, p. 33).

*Information overload* shows that information is being produced faster than managers can deal with it. Because of messaging meltdown, managers are deluged by e-mails, faxes, voicemails, or mobile phones and spend more time reading and listening to them rather than acting upon them. The negative effects of infoglut affect senior-level executives outstripping their ability to process it. The overwhelming flow of information gives them the creeps, affecting both their professional and personal lives: “With e-mails, phone calls, faxes, meetings, and the need to keep current in one’s field, more and more managers and professionals are complaining that they’re suffering overload. The result is lost information and less effective communication” (Robbins, 2005, p. 149).

*Gender styles* further complicate communication patterns, business practices, and often dictate social interactions within a society/given company culture. As has been too often the case, *men’s* communication implies considerably more assertive talk being focused primarily on preserving and maintaining status and power, whereas *women’s* communication strives for building rapport with others and equality in social relationships (Wood, 1994; Tannen, 1991, 1995; Robbins, 2005; Ferraro, 2006). Research concludes that the language of status and independence characterizes men’s speech, and the language of intimacy and connection is a clear indicator of women’s discourse. Women rank high on closeness, are committed to forming friendships prior to conducting business (friendships and work are interrelated). In turn, men rate high on giving advice, asserting control and providing solutions to problems (success is measured by gaining attention – ‘I can top that’ – and climbing the career ladder (by hunting a higher position in the company hierarchy): “Men and women use oral communication for different reasons. Consequently, gender becomes a barrier to effective communication between the sexes. Men use talk to emphasize status, whereas women use it to create connection [...] Women view relating a problem as a way to promote closeness. The women present the problem to gain support and connection, not to get the male’s advice” (Robbins, 2005, p. 149).

*Emotions* play a key role in helping to explain and predict employee behaviour and linguistic style. They may affect communication and job performance in the workplace as well as hinder or negatively influence results and performance; in affective company cultures, people express strong feelings when giving a point of view, use more emotive language, speak loudly, animatedly, with intonation and style (Johnson and Barrall, 2006):

e.g. I’m *really* excited! This is a *great* project! I *just* love it!

The wrong interpretation of their emotions leads them to believe that the people who don't share their feelings are flat and disinterested. Emotions and gender overlap since men and women experience feelings differently, women are capable to express emotions more intensely, read nonverbal messages better than men, smile more often and are socialized to be nurturing; men are less 'talented' at reading nonverbal cues than women, they are taught to be courageous and tough (Hall, 1984; James, 1989; Rafaeli, 1989; Brody and Hall, 1993; Kring and Gordon, 1998). On the emotional continuum, one can identify six universal emotions (*felt emotions*, i.e. the individuals' actual emotions) that trigger a number of negative (deviant) / positive (productive) workplace behaviours and block/unblock business communication:

*anger*: I get *angry* when my employer forces me to stick to rigid hours and limits my time off.

*fear*: I *fear* that I could be pipped at the post by the other candidate.

*fury*: I'm *furious* that the report has been leaked to the press.

*happiness*: I'm *happy* after having received the employee-of-the-year award.

*disgust*: I'm *disgusted* with their petty office politics.

*surprise*: I am *surprised* to see that despite his sensitive and skillful leadership, he can easily get carried away by the excitement of beating off the competition.

People are 'feeling machines', they are emotionally immersed in the experience of their activities in which job roles and demands require them to exhibit emotions which mask or are incongruous with their true feelings. Robbins uses the phrase *extreme emotions* as the antithesis of rationality and a reason for influencing verbal and nonverbal interpretation.

*Language* - once we acknowledge that language has different levels of meaning, we are closer to ensure understanding and *break down communication barriers*. Language can become a potential barrier, but also a challenge to deal with in a constructive way if we make our words clear and understandable. The best approach for managers is to decompose messages full of tiring words and expressions, clichés and jargon, slang and euphemisms into clear, more accurate bits of information that could simplify language, make it compatible with the receiver and appropriate for the circumstance. Managing workforce language diversity means recognizing that our usage of a common language – English – is far from uniform. The challenge for organizations is to address the different terminology used by the more and more diverse groups of people and avoid taking a melting-pot approach to such differences. Unless they succeed in embracing linguistic and cultural differences, there will be a higher potential for difficult interpersonal communication.

#### 4.2. Refining communication skills through emphatic language and power talk

In refining business communication skills, attention is given to the triad *outcome-acuity-flexibility* (O'Connor and Seymour, 2002), the "try other key" metaphor (Ellerton, 2006) in order to explore various behaviours, ways of thinking and become more flexible, or the choice of different paths (Dilts and DeLozier, 2000) so that we are able to see what works and what does not work at any given time. Thus, flexibility is considered a frame of reference helping people, in general, and business people, in particular, "explore different strategies to unlock what they truly want in life or who they are destined to be" (Ellerton, 2006, p. 20).

In my opinion, there are two categories of people in the workplace, the inflexible and the flexible ones. The first type only has the illusion of leading or being "in charge". On the contrary, by being flexible in his behaviour, the other type of person succeeds in improving communication with his boss or colleagues.

In agreement with Johnson and Barrall (2006), I also consider that in terms of building working relationships, business people need to resort to effective strategies like emphasizing particular words in order to create certain effects. To this point, I will illustrate, through practical examples, the importance of making our point more emphatic and the discourse strategies of power talkers:

► Emphasizing your point:

1. Use signals to focus attention on what you are about to say:

a) ***So that's the plan.*** That's what we have to do to put it into practice! (*call for action*)

Now ***let's make a real effort*** to achieve this goal! (*call the audience to action*)

b) ***This is our proposal:*** you should leave a 20% deposit with the order and settle the balance on delivery.

c) ***The main problem is that*** we have no more capital.

2. Use a strong/emphatic word or phrase (e.g. "it is *essential /imperative to +verb*", etc):

- a) It's *essential / (absolutely) imperative* to continue our expansion on overseas markets/to research the market carefully.
- b) Let's be *absolutely* clear about this.
- c) This is *extremely important* for all of us who are directly involved in international project management.
- d) This is *absolutely imperative* and *should* be at the *top* of the *list*.
- e) I *totally* agree it's the best solution.
- f) Now it is *definitely* not the right time to invest.
- g) It is an awkward situation and we need to proceed with *the utmost* care.

3. Use the full form instead of a contraction:

- a) This is *not* what we expect to gain. (instead of *isn't*)
- b) *It is* going to be a challenge. (instead of *it's*)
- c) We *will* succeed. (instead of *we'll*)

4. a) Build sentences around key words (stress these words with your voice):

→ to show sequence:

e.g. First, we'll focus on the current financial situation, *and then* we'll talk about our investment in office technology.

→ to show contrast:

e.g. Checking the bills is *his* responsibility not *yours*.

4. b) Build sentences using the patterns: *What we want is ... (+ noun)*; *It's the price that('s) ... (+ adjective) / (+ subordinate clause)*; *It's not only + adj + noun ... (but) it's also + adjective*

e.g. *What we need / want is more time / a (good) strategy.*

*It's the price that's important.*

*It's making a profit that's essential.* (It's + collocation + that's + adjective)

*It's not only a difficult market, it's also an extremely risky one.*

► Power talk:

1. Use positive language for defining clear outcomes:

- Prefer using positive words (verbs like *succeed, benefit, win, take advantage of, challenge*).
- Eliminate negative words (nouns like *drawback, problem, risk, failure*).
- Prefer using *when* instead of *if* to visualize future success.
- Avoid using modals of possibility (*may, might, could*); prefer using *will*.

e.g. This range of products *may* attract investors ≠ This range of products *will* attract investors.

2. Speak firmly/with determination:

- Avoid tentative expressions introduced by *I think ..., perhaps ..., I'd say ...* . (weak language) + vague language (*things like that, see if they lend us*).
- Stay away from 'disclaimers' (for example phrases like *I may be wrong, I don't know much about this*).

3. Avoid using phrases like *I'm sure / I'm convinced* since they normally suggest the contrary.

4. Use idiomatic expressions such as *cut a long story short, get to the point, put your cards on the table, don't take (me) for a ride* in order to get straight to the point and state your opinion:

e.g. *To cut a long story short*, if you give us your support to this, we can start right away.

I wish he'd *get to the point* soon; he seems he's been beating around the bush so far.

It's time you *put your cards on the table* and avoid any compromise.

5. Speak up (with no hesitation) and avoid unnecessary words (tentative language, denying responsibility):

Hesitation: *er ..., mm ..., oh sorry ....., right, ...erm, you see, I think ...*

Tentative opinions/language: *if we... we could, ... I'm afraid, rather*

Denying responsibility: *I'm not an expert on this but ...*

## 5. Conclusions

Making for advantage in business means that the more choices you have in trying to overcome communication barriers and achieve your outcome, the more likely you are to get the result you are seeking and the easier you persuade or motivate someone to do something they are reluctant to do.

On the basis of the above examples it can be concluded that, in order to sharpen up goals and accomplish successful outcomes, business people resort to effective linguistic strategies which boost energy and motivation, unblock miscommunication and confusion, open the path to feedback, acquire flexibility that will enable them to see problems from different positions.

Therefore, any obstacle to effective communication can be overcome and any misunderstanding or misinterpretation can be corrected as long as power talkers keep being confident and maintain a sense of self-worth.

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