

Linguistic Barriers to Effective Communication

Effective communication is a necessary part of dealing with individuals under stress. An effective dialogue (communication) with an individual who may be showing signs of anxiety can possibly divert energy from an "acting out" scenario to a more rational one. Communication is defined as an exchange process whose purpose is to inform, persuade or entertain another. In order to make this definition complete, understanding must be included. No matter the circumstances that surround the communication process, the receiver and sender must have an understanding of what has been stated, written or implied. If this is not the case, communication is no more than a collection of words, spoken or written, gestures, or sounds.

Why is communication so important? Explicit communication is a cultural assumption. In all facets of our society, we expect what we say is understood and what we hear is what the sender said and meant. This assumption is without merit, unless there is an exact understanding of the communication between the sender and receiver. A partial or total lack of understanding in a communication can give rise to numerous and serious problems. A misunderstood statement, for example, can result in loss of finances, emotional distress or an unnecessary delay. These problems can, and do, occur when we do not make a conscious effort to communicate explicitly.

In every communication three messages are sent:

1. what the sender thought he communicated (meant);
2. what the sender actually communicated (said); and
3. what the receiver of the communication received (heard).

When all three of the messages are the same, you have effective communication. When any of the messages are different, a barrier to effective communication has been erected. If barriers are erected by a "helping person" trying to intervene during a crisis, the resulting behavior of the client can be unpredictable. A misinterpreted statement, for example, can result in an individual "accelerating" into a more aggressive stage, when, in all likelihood, it may have been prevented or, at least, reduced.

Virtually any behavior or mannerism can prove to be a barrier to effective communication. Barriers in communication can be grouped into the following: physical, emotional, psychological, and linguistical. In dealing with people in crisis situations, an understanding of linguistical barriers is of paramount importance for the helping person. Barriers are erected by one or both of the participants in a communication. The placement may be intentional or unintentional depending on the capability of one of the communicators. There are no set time frames for the existence of barriers or when the removal of same is possible. Some may be removed in a matter of seconds, some may never be removed. Key factors in dealing with barriers are: specific barrier recognition

(whatever it might be), acceptance that the barrier poses a problem, and a resolution to overcome the barrier. This process is important. Without barrier recognition, effective communication cannot exist. Barriers to communication are as numerous as the types of communication they interact with. Virtually no form of communication is exempt from the problems these barriers can present.

In dealing with people who are in a crisis, one of the more commonly used forms of communication is linguistic or oral communication. It has been said that America is a country divided by a common language. While this statement may be humorous, it is true. Our society is based on communication, especially oral communication. We spend a great deal of our time communicating through talking. We talk, listen, read and write at an ever-increasing rate. Language is a barrier. An adult, on average, uses 2,000 words, 500 of the more commonly used ones have a total of 14,000 dictionary definitions. In light of this, it is a wonder that anything in our culture is totally understood.

If our language is not complicated enough, specialized groups within our society have established their own language in order to simplify their communication. This jargon is prevalent throughout the helping professions. Uncontrolled use of professional jargon can lead to problems in communication with those outside the profession who are involved, especially those we are trying to help. The public safety "ten code," medical terminology, psychological terms, and the like may be simple for those in that field to understand, but to someone else in a crisis situation this type of communication may be perceived as threatening. Their inability to understand what is being said to or about them may cause increased anxiety, to the point that violent behavior may erupt. This can erect a tremendous barrier between the helping person and the client when, in fact, the only reason for the jargon is that the helping person felt more professional and/or comfortable in the use of same.

Barriers in oral communication can occur when a helping person attempts to adapt or adjust to another's speech pattern. The awareness and understanding of ethnic speech patterns is good in establishing an effective communication, but when someone attempts to communicate using this, without adequate knowledge or ability, problems can arise. These problems can range from a sense of mockery to problems with the connotations of words being used. Also, the use of wording that sounds impressive, but possesses little meaning to the task at hand can provide a barrier to understanding. The receiver may not know the definition of the word used or, if he or she does know the definition, there may be a lack of understanding as to how it fits into the particular discussion.

A final barrier is the literacy of the individual in the crisis. It has been shown that even the most passive of individuals become anxious and frustrated when their listening and comprehension limits, whether high or low, are reached. Although knowledge of the intelligence of individuals in crisis is not always available or known, you should be cognizant of responses obtained from the individual to your communication. The client's body language and/or use of paraverbals may provide a warning if the helping person's communication patterns are increasing the anxiety of the person in crisis. The inability to

recognize these factors can present significant barriers to effective communication, which can lead to a total shutdown of communications with the person in crisis.

The preceding has presented communication barriers that can be erected by the sender of a communication; a sender who may be trying to help an individual. It must be recognized that the other times in the communication, we, the helping persons, are the receiver of communication and, in that position, can cause barriers to be erected. Poor attention to what our clients are saying is an example. Our full attention must be on the client and the situation we are presented with. We must realize that our attention span in a crisis situation can be effected by circumstances outside of the situation at hand. These circumstances must be overcome, or at least diverted, until the crisis situation we are faced with is rectified. Examples of these circumstances range from fatigue to pre-existing personal problems. A factor in our attention deals with the motivation we have being the receiver of communication. When a person is forced to listen to someone, the tendency is to feel that the time spent has been wasted. No matter what the reason for the lack of attention, we must motivate ourselves to be attentive in our communications with clients. Another significant barrier could be erected as a result of a "filtration" system that we have in place in our minds. This system removes filters from communication that we do not want to receive and retains what we want to accept. The system is shaped by our own backgrounds and experiences and, when used, can present significant barriers in understanding communication from our clients.

Summary

There are many linguistical barriers that we must recognize and avert in our roles dealing with people in crisis, both in talking and listening. The helping person must be cognizant of the content and possible meanings of his/her oral communications, as well as his/her own paraverbals. Barriers due to improper communication can be easily erected and difficult to remove, thus making the care, welfare, safety, and security of our clients more difficult.

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