# Overcoming Emotional Barriers to Communication

We've all experienced instances of our emotions getting the best of us. While emotions can be powerful motivators, help guide us towards our passions, and even keep us out of danger, our emotions can also lead us astray if they're left unchecked.

Emotional barriers to communication are usually due to a lack of emotional awareness or control, often referred to as emotional intelligence. By better understanding our inner emotions, we can communicate more productively with others in the workplace and our everyday lives.

## Examples Of Emotional Barriers

Some of the most common examples of emotional barriers in the workplace include:

**Anger.** Anger is detrimental to communication in many ways. First, it makes you less logical. Anger actually affects the way your brain processes information. You're less likely to solve problems effectively, and you're more likely to reject explanations and solutions from others (even when they're right.)

Second, anger tends to cause a strong reaction from those around us. Whether the person you're directing your anger at ends up feeling hurt, scared, or defensive, chances are the conversation isn't going to end up going as productively as it could have.

**Pride.** People who always need to be right or have the last word tend to struggle with healthy communication. Focusing solely on one's own perspective has a way of shutting down communication with others in its tracks. If you want to engage in effective collaboration and communication with your coworkers, you need to be able to listen.

Listening involves more than just hearing someone else's words. It means taking other people's opinions seriously, following other peopl's advice when they have more expertise in a subject than you, and allowing other people to have a say in the final product, even if it's not *exactly* how you would have done it. When pride gets in the way of communication, you don't end up with the best solutions; you just end up with your solutions.

**Anxiety.** Anxiety comes in many forms, like social anxiety, generalized, and panic disorder. It can cause you to avoid certain circumstances, like talking in front of a crowd or speaking up when it would be in your best interest. And when it gets too far out of line, it can easily hold you back career-wise if you're failing to step up to new challenges out of fear.

It also impacts your ability to think clearly and creatively. Many people who suffer from anxiety cite concentration problems as a major consequence of their worrying. Anxious people also tend to engage in what's called dichotomous thinking or "black and white" thinking, imagining the most extreme outcomes rather than seeing creative solutions in the middle.

## Overcoming Emotional Barriers

Emotional intelligence is something we are all born with, in varying degrees, but it can be practiced and improved upon. Here are just a few tips to get you started:

**When you're feeling angry:** Remove yourself from the situation for a bit to give yourself time to "cool off." Remember, while you're still angry, you'll likely have trouble processing logical statements. If you remove yourself long enough to calm yourself down and reassess, you'll get a much clearer picture of what's going on. When you come back, you'll be able to communicate more clearly and make better decisions.

**When your pride is getting in the way:** Practice accepting imperfections, especially in yourself. While people who are prideful can come across as "cocky" or "full of themselves," in truth, pride usually stems from insecurity. People overcompensate to try to cover emotional insecurities with a sense of superiority. Next time you realize that someone else has a better idea or you've made a mistake: openly accept it. Other people will find it much easier to communicate with you if you're able to demonstrate humility from time to time.

**When you're feeling anxious:** Sometimes, anxiety is small, like the kind you feel right before a big presentation. Simple relaxation techniques are likely enough to override this anxiety and get you up on stage feeling confident. Relaxation exercises are the simplest way for anyone to start better managing their anxiety.

However sometimes, anxiety is overwhelming, like when you avoid the company holiday party because being around too many people makes it feel like it's hard to breathe. If anxiety truly interferes with your ability to perform at work and in your personal life, a mental health professional can help you address these issues with more in-depth practices and reframing exercises.

**Note:** Anxiety disorders are the most common of all mental health problems, with up to 1 in 4 adults experiencing them in their lifetime. Talk therapy can be an incredibly powerful tool for managing your anxiety in and out of the office.

## Final Thoughts

To overcome emotional barriers to communication in the workplace, you'll likely need to learn more about how your emotions work and how to manage them. Anger, pride, and anxiety all serve their purposes in life, and eliminating them entirely should never be the goal of your efforts. However, when they begin to interfere with your ability to communicate respectfully, collaborate effectively, and reach your full potential in the workplace, it's time to get to work on your emotional intelligence.

# Overcoming Gender Barriers to Communication

Gender barriers have become less of an issue in recent years, but there are still common communication issues that arise between people of different genders when they misconstrue the words of one another.

Growing equality in the workplace between certain genders—like men and women—hasn't certainly helped in man aspects, but it hasn't necessarily eliminated the communication barriers that arise between people of different genders. As with all types of people who come from different backgrounds, we're socialized in different ways and experience societal pressures and stereotypes of different kinds. Communication styles are inevitably affected by these factors and can lead to problems in the workplace.

The details of where these differences between genders arise shouldn't prevent anyone of any gender from communicating effectively with someone of a different gender. All that's required is some patience, understanding, and empathy.

## Stereotyping

It's important to remember that stereotypes are just that: oversimplified ideas of what a particular type of person or thing ought to be like. Not all men, women, or otherwise are going to communicate in the same way as the rest of their gender. While several traits tend to be more common in one gender than another, it's important to allow people to define their own individual style of communication without expecting them to conform to any one style common to their gender. This understanding is key to creating a work environment that fosters open communication and acceptance amongst all employees.

## Examples Of Gender Barriers

As you have navigated along in this world, you've probably met plenty of people who do and do not fit into your idea of how their gender typically acts, speaks, or looks. The world is made up of unique individuals, and respecting each person's individuality is incredibly important in establishing a safe work environment.

**You may have made assumptions about whether a particular gender:**

– Tends to talk about people vs. tangible things
– Tends to ask questions vs. sharing information
– Tends to discuss issues with other people when they arise vs. dealing with them on their own
– Tends to focus on their feeling and the meaning behind people's gestures/words vs. focusing on facts and taking things at face-value
– Tends to hold onto conflicts after they're over vs. moving on quickly

**Note:** These are over-simplified examples. Most people are a mix of tendencies, and no one person fits into any given stereotype to a T.

**Overcoming Gender Barriers to Communication**

If you suspect gender barriers are affecting your workplace communication, here are some helpful hints:

**Educate your team about gender and gender bias.** People often struggle to identify their own biases and areas of ignorance, but when people are made aware of them, it creates the possibility for positive change. Most people, given information that shows how they've treated another person unfairly, will want to do what they can to correct their behavior.

**Encourage diversity.** If you're sitting in a conference room discussing how a new policy/process will affect your entire company and only men are present, chances are you could be missing out on ramifications that unfairly affect other genders. Include people of different genders, races, backgrounds, etc., so that decisions can be made in light of how they will affect everyone at your company, and not just one group or gender.

**Equip your HR team.** If an issue does arise, you want to make sure you have an HR representative who is informed and equipped to deal with these kinds of matters in a respectful, tactful, and fair manner.

**Final Thoughts**

Offices are full of all kinds of people from different walks of life. The more we learn about each other, and the more we allow people to act as unique individuals, the happier and more supported employees will feel at work.

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# Overcoming Interpersonal Barriers to Communication

One of the trickiest obstacles to effective communication is interpersonal barriers. The ability to interact with others face-to-face and exchange information clearly through both verbal and non-verbal messages is the basis for much of our everyday communication. Without interpersonal communication skills, it is very hard for an individual to find success in both their professional as well as personal life.

Luckily, these skills can be practiced and improved upon. By identifying behavior patterns that stop us from connecting with others, we can begin to form better habits that enhance all of the relationships in our lives.

**Examples of Interpersonal Barriers**

All of us have struggled to connect with others at some point or another, but for some, this problem can be perpetual and destructive. Poor self-esteem, social anxiety, and other issues can make it difficult for people to feel comfortable opening up to others, which hurts their ability to communicate feelings accurately to others as well as their ability to interpret others. You might experience these struggles in the following ways:

**Lack of participation:** It's impossible to communicate with someone who doesn't want to. People can appear unwilling to communicate when they don't speak up when they should, dodge direct questions, or use defensive body language.

**Lack of open-mindedness:** It's tough to communicate with someone who refuses to explore different points of view, opinions, or ideas about the world. We must be able to get along with people of different viewpoints to function even at a basic level with other people.

**Overcoming Interpersonal Barriers**

Whether you're struggling to reach out to others or you're dealing with someone who seems difficult to connect with, there are many things you can practice to improve the situation:

**Use simple language.** When we're having difficulty connecting, overly complex words and ideas might be the things standing in the way. Break down your conversation into it's simplest parts and try again. We all come with our own biases, backgrounds, and interpretations of the world, and it's easy for two people to have entirely different views of the conversation at hand. Leave as little up to interpretation as possible, and stick to the facts.

**Practice active listening.** When we're struggling to communicate, we often spend too much time focusing on our own words, and not enough time listening and responding. Next time you find yourself in conflict with another, instead of finding new and different ways to restate your opinions or 'win' the argument, try asking questions

and actively listening to the answer. Don't cut off your speaker, and ask follow up questions. After all, listening is half of communication.

**Stay calm.** The hardest part of working through a communication barrier is keeping your frustrations in check. Remember, you're not going to get your point across any clearer by seeming annoyed. Stay calm, and most importantly be patient. Give the conversation that time it needs.

**Provide feedback.** We could all learn a lot about our communication styles and skills if we got more feedback from others. Don't be afraid to share constructive criticism when it would genuinely help the other person communicate more productively with others.

**Final Thoughts**

What are some of your favorite strategies for bridging interpersonal barriers to communication?

# Overcoming Perceptual Barriers to Communication

Some barriers to communication are obvious, like physical obstacles and language differences. Others, like how we carry ourselves and interpret others, can be much harder to detect. Perceptual barriers to communication are more difficult to recognize and decode precisely because they take place internally. Sometimes, we don't even realize we're creating them.

Unfortunately, human beings aren't objective observers walking around the world able to extract the "true" nature of one another. How we perceive and interact with the world is greatly shaped by our economic & social status, the culture we grew up in, our level of education, etc. Sometimes called "conditioning," our understanding of the world and how we choose to act in it are formed over years of reinforcement based on our individual environments.

This conditioning can lead us to make assumptions, form stereotypes, or misunderstand others whose life experiences differ from our own. While we know bringing together diverse worldviews in the workplace helps inspire creativity and innovation, it can also create communication issues when we mistake our individual expressions for universal truths.

**Examples of Perceptual Barriers**

There are two basic types of perceptual barriers:

1. **Perceptual Filters** i.e. the personal preferences, values, attitudes, origins, and life experiences that create the "filters" through which we view other people, events, and information.
2. **Triggers and Cues** i.e. the nonverbal clues, such as body language and facial gestures, that affect how people perceive what we say.

Let's walk through a quick example of how these barriers can play out:

Andy has a new idea for a marketing campaign that he's really excited about. She needs his teammate Beth's design skills to come up with a formal presentation for his boss. However, Andy heard Beth recently criticizing a similar campaign done by another company.

As he approaches Beth to share his idea and ask for help, he has already convinced himself that she won't like the campaign, causing him to use defensive language and body gestures. As he tries to explain why his idea is so great and her previous criticism of a similar campaign was wrong, she interprets his bid for help as arrogance and feels he's belittling her. Even though she likes the campaign idea, she would rather not work with someone who speaks down to her, so she says she's too busy and suggests he ask another designer for help. Ultimately, the project suffers because Beth is the agencies best designer, and Andy's boss rejects the idea.

When we assume that people won't understand or agree with us based on our (often false) ideas about their background, sense of taste/style, or perceived interests, we can unconsciously sabotage ourselves.

**Overcoming Perceptual Barriers**

When in the workplace, it's important to address perceptual barriers to facilitate greater team collaboration. Here are a few things you can do:

**Challenge your own assumptions.** We all form beliefs about one another, and it would be impossible to walk around your office approaching each person as an entirely blank slate each and every day. However, you should never leave those beliefs and assumptions unchecked. Instead of assuming your reasoning for feeling one way is correct (even if it has been before), try examining how people and situations around you might be interpreted differently if they were looked at from someone else's point of view.

**Practice positive body language.** The nonverbal aspects of your interactions with others (such as posture, eye contact, and body stance) can communicate a lot about how confident, interested, or engaged you are in a conversation or topic. Because body language can be easily influenced by stress or tiredness, it's important that you stay in tune with how your physical behaviors could be misinterpreted.
Practice positive body language when communicating with others to ensure that you aren't unintentionally disrespecting those around your or sending a wrong message.

**Final Thoughts**

Something as simple as the volume of someone's voice, the stance of their body, or the expression on their face can drastically change how other people perceive their message, regardless of the communicators intent. Similarly, where someone grew up or how they were raised can change how they interpret a joke or generalization, again, regardless of the communicators intent.

Above all, it's important that we empathize with one another by trying to understand how others could view things differently than we do. All of us walk around day to day with beliefs and opinions that contradict those around us. By breaking down and questioning our assumptions about others, we can bridge the communication gaps that arise because of our natural perceptual differences.

# Overcoming Language Barriers to Communication

Language barriers are a common challenge here at Nulab, as they are with many international companies. With Nulab offices in Japan and the US, we are often working on new and better ways to understand one another, bridge communication gaps, and improve company-wide collaboration. More than half of us speak Japanese, some only speak English, and a growing majority are learning to speak both. In light of globalization, we're bound to see more and more companies start to face these same challenges.

**Types of Language Barriers**

We've already given you the most obvious example of a language barrier: people speaking languages native to different regions. But there are more subtle types of language barriers. For example, your industry or skill set may involve a lot of jargon or technical language. When you're speaking to people outside your industry, or even outside your department, a lot can get lost in translation.

At Nulab, our development team makes up a huge portion of our company. When speaking to other departments, it's important that each developer can communicate information in terms everyone can understand to ensure we're all aligned on our companies goals. If marketing doesn't understand what Dev is doing, and Dev has no idea what the executive team is doing, we're all in deep trouble.

Another example of a language barrier is dialects. People can technically be speaking the same language, but dialectical differences can create misunderstandings and gaps in communication. India, for example, uses over 22 major languages, written in 13 different scripts, with over 720 dialects. That leaves a lot of room for linguistic mix-ups!

A final example you should be aware of is language disabilities. Many people work with physical impediments to language such as stuttering, dysphonia, and hearing loss. These have no bearing on someone's ability to understand and do their job, but it can make communication more cumbersome.

With so many ways language can impede our ability to collaborate, it's crucial to have strategies for connecting everyone. We have seven tips to get you started.

**Overcoming Language Barriers**

To overcome language barriers in the workplace, here are a few things you can do:

**1. Use plain language.** Whether you're working with someone who knows your primary language as a secondary, or you're trying to communicate a deeply technical problem to your non-technical coworkers, everyone should get in the habit of using plain language whenever possible. While many people try to use large words to make themselves sound intelligent or good at their jobs, they're not doing anyone any favors. Using jargon or esoteric vocabulary only creates the opportunity for miscommunication and makes people feel bad that they can't understand what you're

saying. Creating a culture in your workplace of speaking simply and explaining all issues as straightforwardly as possible is key.

**2. Find a reliable translation service.** If you're working across international offices, enlist the help of a qualified translator or find a translation service that meets your needs. Every document deemed important to the entire company should be translated into the primary language of your other offices. Be careful when finding a service, and be sure to vet their qualifications. You'll see several free websites that claim to translate text from one language to another, but they may not account for different dialects. And sometimes, words have different usages in different cultures.

**3. Enlist interpreters.** Whether you have existing bilingual employees or hire one, trusted interpreters should be used to ensure that there isn't any information or instruction missed due to a language barrier.

**4. Provide classes for your employees.** If you're working in a highly technical environment, like a SaaS company, include a crash course to your jargon during initial job training, and consider ongoing learning classes later on. Sales need to understand the ins and outs of any product they're selling; marketing needs to understand why their products are important; and everyone needs to be able to speak a common language to plan for the future of the company.

If you're an international company, offer free classes for learning the language of another office. Here at Nulab, our Japan office takes weekly English classes. Many of our staff have become conversational or even fluent because of these classes. This has opened up a world of opportunity for our English speaking teams to communicate better with our Japanese offices.

**5. Use visual methods of communication.** Words often fail us, and when they do, showing can be a lot more effective than telling. Use pictures or diagrams to explain complicated concepts. Visual queues are invaluable for getting everyone on the same page, not to mention, thinking more creatively about new solutions.

**6. Use repetition.** Language barrier or not, people often need to hear something more than once to understand and remember it. Don't expect anyone to remember something you said once. If it's important, make it a regular part of your communication.

**7. Be respectful.** Language barriers, like all barriers to communication, can be frustrating. They require patience, understanding, and conscientiousness. Ensure that when you or your team are struggling to communicate that you never raise your voice or over-enunciate. Talk slower instead of louder, clearly instead of forcefully. And remember, when someone is working through a language hurdle, it has nothing to do with their actual intelligence or ability to grasp the concept behind what you're trying to say. Continue to speak proper English as you search for common ground, so they can learn how to understand correctly, too.

**Final Thoughts**

Language barriers can be a challenge, but working with people of different cultures and backgrounds is what drives innovation, creativity, and success. Don't let language barriers stand in the way of embracing everything a diverse workplace has to offer.

# Overcoming Cultural Barriers to Communication

One of the biggest challenges of living in a globally connected world is communicating effectively with people of different cultural backgrounds. Our world is made up of a diverse landscape of values and norms, and sometimes they conflict. Cultural differences, whether they stem from greater societal factors or individual experiences, can create communication barriers that hurt team productivity and collaboration. It's important to be able to identify these problems early and find solutions that ensure everyone can communicate efficiently and feel comfortable doing so.

**Examples of Cultural Barriers to Communication**

Sometimes cultural barriers are easy to predict, but often they don't become apparent until you're actively working together.

Factors that could affect cultural views in the workplace include:

**Generation** – The internet is packed with articles deconstructing the cultural differences between Millenials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers. While many of the differences between us are overblown, our varying life experiences and stages in life can strongly influence how we act and think when it comes to work.

**Work Experience** – When someone moves from a larger corporation to a startup, or vice versa, they often face some form of culture shock when they get there. Someone used to an environment where there is an emphasis on seniority and status may find it difficult to adapt to a flatter organizational structure. Someone who is used to self-organizing may find it difficult to adapt to top-down approaches.

**Education** – Some of us pursue formal training (i.e. college degrees, certification programs, etc.) before entering our careers and others learn their roles on the job. How people acquire knowledge and skills can shape how they approach projects and the people around them.

**Personal Background** – Where people grow up or currently live can influence their work values. For example, New Yorkers are known for their fast pace and long hours. Someone new to New York City may struggle to keep up with that pace, and a New Yorker moving to a smaller city might rub some people the wrong way with their constant sense of urgency.

**Ethnicity** – Ethnicity or national origin create a lot of differences in regards to how people perceive certain expressions, behaviors, gestures, and habits. In Japan, generally speaking, people tend to be more formal than in the United States. They stand farther apart from each other when speaking and often address one another using last names with honorifics. An example of how we see this formality effect business is with customer service. In American restaurants, people expect waiters to ask how their food is, and friendly chit chat is encouraged. In Japan, quality customer service is characterized as unobtrusive.

**How to Approach Differences**

Cultural differences should in no way prevent you from hiring or collaborating with different kinds of people. On the contrary, diversity has been shown to boost your bottom line! But in embracing cultural diversity, you'll need to know how to bridge differences and unite your team.

Start by getting to know what those cultural differences are on your team. Some may be immediately apparent, while others will require you to seek feedback. Ask your team how they like to work and how they like to be managed. Remember, a sign of a great manager is not one's ability apply a single management style equally across a team; it's ones ability to adapt to be the best kind of manager for each team member as an individual. As you demonstrate a willingness to learn about and accommodate cultural differences, most of your employees will respond positively.

Once you've identified areas of cultural differences, you can approach them as such:

**1. Determine how these differences are relevant to the job.** If someone asks for an accommodation that doesn't negatively affect the results of their work, you should freely grant it. However, if cultural differences are impacting a person's ability to complete their job, steps will need to be taken to help them adapt their workflow.

**2. Identify whether or not you can reasonably accommodate the cultural difference.** Sometimes there is a simple solution, like changing the way in which you praise someone for a job well done or providing additional positive feedback. Other times, the accommodations a person requires may be incompatible with the job itself.

**3. Follow through with reasonable accommodations, and lay out a plan of action for those that can't be made.** Once you've decided to make an exception or change your behavior towards an individual, make sure you're following up to ensure that they're getting the continued support they need to succeed. If there was no reasonable accommodation available, determine what steps need to be taken to ensure this person receives the training and support they need to adapt their working style.

**4. Educate yourself about common cultural differences.** Is your team made up of all different age groups? Look up management techniques relevant to each age group, and see how you can combine styles to suit different people. Is your team sprawled out across the globe? Research basic cultural norms for the region, like how they address one another and what common signs of respect are. You can learn a lot from a quick Google search, and your entire team and company will be better off for your efforts.

**Final Thoughts**

Obviously, every preference of every individual can't be accommodated under one company. But meeting cultural differences with respect and action will allow every team member to perform at their best. Learning to work with people from different backgrounds and life experiences is important for all of us, inside the workplace and out.

# Overcoming Physical Barriers to Communication

Physical barriers to communication have plagued the workforce since hunter-gatherers first walked too far into the woods to hear their fellow hunters cry "BEAR. VERY BIG BEAR."

While bears have become less of an issue (for most), physical elements still come between us: doors, walls, building floors, excessive noise, even continents. The larger and more spread out the workforce, the harder it seems to be to make everyone's physical environment conducive to communication.

Identifying these barriers is the first step. With a little effort, your organization will be able to spot and resolve these issues way before you need to warn Bill from Accounting about any amount of bears.

**Types of Physical Barriers to Communication**

Luckily, physical barriers are fairly easy to spot. If you want to talk to your boss, but they're locked in their office, you've found a physical barrier. If you're making a verbal announcement and the people on the second floor can't hear you, you've found a physical barrier. Anything in the physical world (i.e. not in your mind) that stands between you and effective communication is a physical barrier that can be addressed.

In general, there are three types of physical barriers that prevent individuals from effective communication:

**1. Environment** – These barriers are due to the place we're trying to communicate in. As anyone who has been to a noisy bar and tried to hold a conversation will know, excessive noise can lead to a lot of missed information. One person tries to nod along politely as if to say "Ah, yes," as the other waits patiently for a response to a question that's gone completely unheard.

**2. Distance** – Distances between floors, buildings, or cities can make collaborating and communicating with team members a struggle. Bringing people together to work towards a common goal when they aren't even on the same continent introduces real challenges to efficiency. Phone calls and emails end up displacing face-to-face interactions, and that small difference can have a big impact on team cohesion.

**3. Medium** – So much of modern communication takes place across different pieces of technology. For communication to be effective, people need to understand and ascribe to certain norms of how these mediums are used. What's appropriate to say when and where? What do certain actions or symbols mean? And how do we interpret more subtle queues? If someone doesn't understand the norms for using a certain medium (I'm looking at you grandma that keeps ending her Tweets with "Sincerely, Agnes") when sending a message, their intention can be lost.

**Common Solutions that Enhance Communication**

Don't worry, the solution to physical barriers isn't to have us all exist in a sustained group hug. Some physical barriers may need to be removed, but others can be compensated for. Here are a few examples of solutions:

– Many industries that thrive on collaboration adopt "open office" plans that substitute cubicles and corner offices for open tables and shared conference rooms. Most people agree that still having personal areas to focus is important for productivity (and sanity), so quiet stations are created to give those who need time to themselves during certain work activities a break from the bustle.

– As teams disperse across the globe, email tends to become a top form of communication. Today, email has become one of the biggest time-sucks for the modern worker. Consequently, organizations are adopting new technologies, like messaging apps with designated channels for topics, where employees can get more immediate answers to questions and easily track organized conversations online. Highly-efficient companies come up with best-practices for sending messages so as not to overwhelm employees with too many simultaneous conversations. Notification controls and direct messaging functions ensure employees only see messages relevant to them.

– Video conferencing tools continue to improve each year with increased video/sound quality and lower costs, and as a result, they have become a tremendous asset in organizations where regular in-person meetings are impossible. Video tools give teams the face-to-face interactions they desire while reducing company's reliance on expensive travel.

– With so much information to keep track of, project management tools have become increasingly popular on teams and in industries where they weren't previously used. Instead of gathering huge groups of people into long, drawn-out status meetings to keep track of complex projects, project management tools automate tracking and give visibility to every team member. Teams can now stay informed in real-time about assignments and progress of different team members within their organization, instead of having to wait for the next weekly catch-up. On top of keeping teams more organized, automating these processes opens up meeting times for more productive communication and planning time.

**Final Thoughts**

With physical barriers removed or compensated for, teams can focus on discovering collaborative solutions to the tasks in front of them. And, they don't ever have to worry that anyone on their team might miss a nearby bear.