

Course: Introduction to Speech

Course Completed: Fall 2010

Assignment Title: Sharing Personal Information: Disclosure vs. Privacy

Assignment Project Description: The objective in this assignment was to select an area of communication and bring a new perspective to it.

Reflection: I selected this paper because in an organizational setting the topic of disclosure and privacy can be a very sensitive subject. Self-disclosure and privacy is a concept that every individual in an organizational environment must be prepared to manage.



Sharing Personal Information: Disclosure vs. Privacy

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Effective verbal or oral interpersonal communication involves several basic elements that assist both the speaker and the listener to interact and synthesize spoken information in a manner that will produce comprehension and understanding. Many of those elements include the identical considerations given to effective written communication. Some of those elements are the *purpose* behind the communication, the *audience* who will be receiving the message, the *tone* of information delivery, the *content* of the communication, and the *style* in which the information was delivered.

Communication elements are useful reminders when attempting to reach a target audience with a specific purpose. In the case of disclosure or self-disclosure, the discloser specifically chooses a singular audience for very specific content. While delivering the verbal message, the focus is on the spoken word, but nonverbal communication plays an equal role (Laurenceau and Kleinman 2006). Nonverbal clues may further influence the tone and style of the intended message. Consider that nonverbal clues can either support or completely change the meaning of the accompanying words and can determine whether the interactions have positive, negative or neutral outcomes (Weiten et al. 2008). The purpose behind the communication may also vary. Self-disclosure may assist in playing a key role in mental health (Greene et. al. 2006), can reduce stress and boost positive self-feelings (Vittengl and Holt 2000), and can lead to feelings of closeness, thereby improving personal relationships (Laurenceau and Kleinman 2006).

When the communication involves divulging personal information, however, there is yet another consideration to be taken into account. With the continued rapid

advancement of technology and consequent online social networking growth, this facet of communication becomes even more complex and often leads to miscommunication and misunderstanding. This aspect is that of the disclosure-privacy dialectic, or the balance between communications about personal information intended to be open and shared versus those intended to be closed and private.

The term disclosure involves “revealing confidential or secret information” (Verderber, et. al., 2010 p. 266) and the general term also encompasses self-disclosure, the act of one sharing his or her own personal or biographical data, as well as personal thoughts, feelings, and ideas (Verderber, et. al., 2010 p. 266). The disclosure concept may be further compounded when a disclosure may inadvertently or purposely disclose private information about others.

The concept of privacy is exactly as the term suggests and is contrary to disclosure. Privacy is engaged when the speaker wishes to keep information secret or confidential. The desire for privacy may involve a wish to lessen an individual’s susceptibility through others’ knowledge of particular information, or simply an increased independence through the protection of certain personal information or facts.

At some time or other, everyone has surely experienced having shared a secret bit of information with another, entrusting another individual with confidential and personal information, only to find that this same trusted individual has shared the information with another person. The shared information is now compromised and the one who originally shared this information feels betrayed and angry, and, depending on the nature of the shared information, may be emotionally hurt by information now offered to the public.

This bit of information may have been important, or may have been inconsequential, however, because the intention was to keep it private and shared with only a select individual, the fact that the information has been revealed and disclosed without authority, complicates the relationship between the two communicating individuals.

This tension created between disclosure and privacy can be applied to a situation that occurred in my life. I attended a class party where most of my eighth grade class members were present. This party was well chaperoned, with several parents attending and supervising. One class member, though, was not very scrupulous and he found great fun in damaging or destroying several of the neighboring homes' mailboxes at some point during the party. As is commonly the case with those who want credit or admiration for their feats, the perpetrator self-disclosed this private information to me. It was intended to remain confidential, and I fully intended for it to remain so.

The girls in the class were invited to spend the night with the class member hosting the party and I stayed the night. The next morning, as the neighbors became aware of the criminal mischief to their properties, they approached the embarrassed party hosts, who, in turn, turned to the guests who were still present, namely the girls who were just waking up.

These parents took each of the girls aside, separately, one by one. We were each asked if we knew who had destroyed the mailboxes and when no names were offered up, we were all threatened with the consequences of our affiliation and protection once the police eventually found the responsible person. They continued to detail the penalties for such a crime and assured us that the penalty would be identical for anyone who knew and

did not tell. The parents guaranteed that anyone who broke their silence would remain an anonymous informer. Torn between my promise to keep the information confidential, and my fear for my own consequence and my parents' disappointment with my silence, I disclosed what I had been told the night before.

You might guess that I did not remain an anonymous source. It wasn't more than an hour after I had left the host's house that day that my friend was calling and asking if it were true that I had told he damaged the mailboxes. It turned out the host parents had not held my disclosure in confidence. Not only did my friend know, but the entire class became aware of my disclosure to the adults in charge. I suffered a great emotional blow on many levels. Many of my friends felt I had betrayed another and no longer wanted much to do with me. I felt betrayed by the parents who had promised my disclosed information would be held in a strict and anonymous confidence. Doing the right thing did not end up being the right thing to do.

I learned much from that unwanted original self-disclosure given to me by the mailbox smasher and in turn from my coerced disclosure to the host parents. I no longer disclose any bit of information to anyone if I cannot afford to have the information go public. Likewise, I never promise another individual that I can keep private, personal information confidential. It's not that I purposely disclose my friends' closest secrets and cannot be trusted. I simply know that when a disclosure is given, the information becomes part of the receiver. As such, the receiver becomes part owner of the shared information and may inadvertently give it away to a third party, without realizing its value or impact.

Disclosing another's private information is more than either purposely or accidentally sharing information; it results in damage to personal relationships, and the risk is that the information may not have been repeated with the correct meaning or emphasis (thus causing even more misunderstanding and unnecessary harm to uninvolved persons), or in the case of business or workplace disclosures, may damage a co-worker's or a company's reputation or cause loss of business.

As if those repercussions are not serious enough, disclosing personal information on the Internet through social networking sites, has caused some positive, but generally negative and significant consequences. These social networking sites are virtual communities where people convene to chat, IM, post pictures, and blog ("Social Networking" 2006). These sites provide instant community, instant celebrity status, and provides a unique and relatively safe way for trying out new identities. Each networking site has a privacy policy, and most have a way of configuring the sign-up process to regulate who gets which level of access to the site and who can have access to your shared information ("Social Networking" 2006).

Individuals, regardless of age, erroneously view the Internet as a safe, familiar, intimate location where intensely personal information can be recorded and shared by those whom the owner of the page permits. At least, that is what happens in theory. One might think that personal posted self-disclosures are private or reserved just for their friends. However, blog pages can be and frequently are viewed by college admissions staff or potential employers who may make acceptance or hiring decisions based on blog comments found exclusively on the Internet. When a post is removed, every possibility

remains that the disclosure can be captured and archived somewhere forever, and unexpectedly turn up again later.

Even more disturbing, likes, dislikes, and locations become available for view by sexual predators and others who use the anonymous nature of the online world to their advantage. There are never any guarantees that online “friends” are who they claim to be. The social networking sites the Internet has produced has also helped to blur the depth and breadth of an individual’s self-disclosures. Generally, the depth and breadth would be greater with best friends, as opposed to casual acquaintances or strangers. So much for shared intimacy and self-disclosure to a chosen audience.

According to Petronio (2002), there are generally five criteria that we use when developing our own rules about disclosure and privacy. They include our cultural background and the propensity of our particular culture in general to disclose or respect a higher level of privacy. The tendency of individualistic cultures to remain private are in contrast to cultures that are collectivist and, as such, are more inclined to disclose (Petronio 2002). Gender is another criteria whereby strength of gender association may influence personal rules for disclosure or privacy. Motivational level of the individual at the time of disclosure as well as the context of the disclosure itself are both influences on an individual’s decision to share or self-disclose information. Finally, an evaluation of risk versus benefit gains for the individual is the last criteria (Petronio 2002). The risk of remaining private and consequentially socially isolated and misunderstood by others must be weighed against the risky business of self-disclosing personal information.

Whether an individual is able to manage privacy without alienating others by failure to self-disclose, or whether an individual develops personal rules and criteria and is able to successfully manage self-disclosure in appropriate times and circumstances remains a delicate balance. The decision to share personal thoughts, feelings, and ideas is a critical component of effective interpersonal communication. As humans socially evolve and progress, the risk of self-revelation is inevitable and crucial. It is a valuable quality that all social beings must work to develop and cultivate.

Works Cited

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