

A STUDY OF THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN APPROPRIATE AND INAPPROPRIATE  
INTERPERSONAL SELF-DISCLOSURE IN A WORK ENVIRONMENT

A Thesis by

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I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in Communication.

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We have read this thesis  
and recommend its acceptance:

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## DEDICATION

To my wife and my family

## ABSTRACT

Every interpersonal communication event is unique because the information being self-disclosed within each dialogue an individual has with others is distinctive. This preliminary study explores the difference between appropriate and inappropriate interpersonal self-disclosure in a work setting. Disclosure and how it affects workplace relationships is the broad subject studied during the process of interviewing subjects. Subjects for the interviews include 12 males and 12 females from blue and white collar occupations. These subjects have worked in a job full-time for at least two consecutive years. A results section backs up the method used with quotes from participants in the study. Additionally, the conclusions present further questions and possibilities in the research on self-disclosure.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Conversations are a regular occurrence in the workplace. Some conversations are about work while others are more social. There are times while at work where our personal lives come up in conversation. It is then up to the individual to decide what sort of information will be shared in the work environment.

A conversation can occur while hanging around the water cooler or while sharing tasks in close proximity with co-workers. An individual may decide to talk about how their weekend went and what they did during their time off from a busy work week. It seems harmless and work goes on in its normal way as if nothing ever happened. The information shared was appropriate for the workplace and nobody felt uncomfortable during the conversation.

There are other times when conversations lead into the personal lives of co-workers. For instance, when asked what your plans are for the weekend you mention you are going out of town with your spouse for a weekend trip for your anniversary. This information seems appropriate for the workplace so you think nothing of it until you receive feedback in the form of a disclosure from your co-worker. Your co-worker proceeds to compare your anniversary celebration with her anniversary where her second husband was in a rehabilitation center for an addiction problem. Now you feel uncomfortable and do not know how to respond without hurting your co-worker's feelings.

This *exploratory* study provides background about what causes individuals to share personal information while in a work environment. This study is focused on the grey area

between appropriate communication and the form of inappropriate communication that may be considered over the line.

Sexual harassment in the workplace is beyond the scope of this project. According to McCabe and Hardman (2005), sexual harassment is not always clearly defined due to variance in each individual's definition of sexual harassment. "Although researchers often agree on the extreme cases of sexual harassment and define them as such, researchers do not always identify the milder, more ambiguous forms of sexual harassment as sexual harassment" (McCabe and Hardman, 2005, p. 719). In their literature review, McCabe and Hardman (2005) discuss how "the relationship between gender role and attitude toward and perceptions of sexual harassment is less clear" (p. 721). Sexual harassment is a topic that is separate from the type of information researched for this study. This study addresses the reasoning behind an individual sharing personal information in a way that may be looked upon as over-sharing, inappropriate, and uncalled for in workplace conversations. The reason for this is because there is an overlap between what is appropriate and what is not appropriate. It is this study's job to *preliminarily* find out what exists in that grey, overlapping area.

## Literature Review

### Organizational Communication

#### Formal Communication

Communicating in the workplace is categorized by three modes of communication: downward, upward, and horizontal communication (Johns & Saks, 2005). When managers or supervisors communicate with their employees they are communicating down to them. Johns and Saks (2005) state that,

Downward communication flows from the top of the organization towards the bottom. For example, a vice-president of production might instruct a plant manager to gear up for manufacturing a new product. In turn, the plant manager would provide specifics to supervisors, who would instruct the production workers accordingly. (p. 310)

The opposite can be said for upward communication, which involves any information shared from the bottom of an organization with the top of the organization (Johns & Saks, 2005). An example would be an employee coming up with an idea for a product. This employee would then let his or her supervisor know about the idea, who would then let the manager of the organization know about the idea.

This study is more concerned with horizontal communication than downward or upward communication within an organization. “Horizontal communication occurs between departments or functional units, usually as a means of coordinating effort” (Johns & Saks, 2005, p. 310). The departments or units could be individuals or co-workers working in those particular areas sharing information between one another while working as a team.

### Informal Communication

When communicating in a downward or upward flow one would consider this to be formal communication within the organization. However, it is informal communication done horizontally within an organization that is the focus here. Informal communication or interaction has been known to “help people accomplish their jobs more effectively” (Johns & Saks, 2005, p. 311). On the other hand some informal communication may provide an opportunity for rumors to spread throughout the organization.

There are times when informal communication is allowed between employees and their superiors. According to Johns and Saks (2005), “the opportunity for employees to communicate directly with a manager without going through the chain of command” is known as an open door

policy (p. 311). Therefore, it is possible for an employee to have an informal conversation with a manager.

The informal communication network within an organization is known as the “grapevine” (Johns and Saks, 2005). This is where personal information is might be shared between co-workers. Who is more likely to share personal information while at work? Johns and Saks (2005) provide a couple of examples. They state that extroverts might be more likely to share information as well as employees with low self-esteem in order to get the upper hand in their work environment.

#### Work-related Communication

Another example of communication in the workplace would be any verbal communication related to work or work-related communication. This would be considered as appropriate communication for the workplace since it covers their occupation. A part of work-related communication is jargon. According to Johns and Saks (2005), jargon is “specialized language used by job holders or members of particular occupations or organizations” (p. 315). Jargon provides employees with an element of their lives in which to relate to one another.

Work-related communication can span multiple positions within the same organization. This, too, brings employees closer together in terms of how they relate and communicate with one another. Communicating about work-related issues can lead into how an employee feels about certain tasks or other employees in the organization. It is at this point that organizational communication becomes interpersonal communication.

## Interpersonal Communication

Typically, interpersonal communication is communication between two people. This, of course, occurs frequently in the work environment due to how close employees work with one another on shared tasks. Organizational communication is used to produce a result out of the communicative activities whereas interpersonal communication is used to find similarities with one another in accordance with how they view themselves (Cushman & Cahn, 1985). An interpersonal relationship will develop based upon topics discussed between two co-workers and whether or not they both agree with each other's opinions.

It is through interpersonal communication that one determines whether or not they relate to another (Cushman & Cahn, 1985). Cushman and Cahn (1985) continue by stating,

Through communication, individuals describe and propose their preferred relationship to objects or others; e.g. I love you, I dislike hamburger, I am going bald, I want to be your friend, and I am fat. These descriptions and assertions are questioned and then accepted or rejected by others using communication. In this manner, individuals learn who they are and how they can and cannot relate to others. (p. 35)

This form of interpersonal relationship development can be found among co-workers as well as the form of relationship development Cushman and Cahn are discussing. Co-workers need to be able to communicate with one another. Being able to develop an interpersonal relationship is an essential element in their job development as a whole.

According to Phillips and Wood (1983), "interpersonal communication is fundamental to successful human existence" (p. 272). The same can be said for workplace relationships.

Employees need to be able to interact with one another on an interpersonal level in order to be successful in their occupation. Phillips and Wood (1983) also say that "there are a great many human problems that simply cannot be solved unless people understand what other people are saying so they can figure out what *they* believe and how to respond appropriately" (p. 272).

Cushman and Cahn (1985) suggest that “we need to realize that who we are in interaction...is a subtle interaction between our own desires and communication skills and the desire of others for us and their communication skills” (p. 20). An example of this would be co-workers sharing information that would make him or her seem intelligent. It is then up to the co-worker receiving the shared information to either challenge or not challenge the information shared by the discloser of the information.

Interpersonal relationships are maintained and developed based upon the choices made by the parties involved in the relationship. Phillips and Wood (1983) state that “it is crucial to acknowledge personal responsibility so that you can make thoughtful choices about the kinds of relationships you want and select effective ways to try to obtain them” (p. 278). These choices involve the type and amount of information one chooses to share with a co-worker. This sharing of personal information is better known as self-disclosure.

### Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure is what individuals verbally reveal about themselves (including thoughts, feelings, and experiences) to others (Derlega, Metts, Petronio & Margulis, 1993). It is considered to be the most vital element in developing an interpersonal relationship. Individuals disclose information to family, friends, co-workers, groups and entire organizations. Information is disclosed to further develop relationships in order to indicate where a relationship stands and what boundaries can and cannot be crossed in the communication process. Furthermore, self-disclosure is not just a one-time event where every bit of information is shared all at once.

Dindia (2000) believes it to be an ongoing process:

Self-disclosure (SD) is not a dichotomous event defined by whether the person has disclosed or has not disclosed. Instead, SD is an ongoing process that is extended in time

and is open-ended, not only across the course of an interaction or series of interactions, but also across the lives of individuals as their identities develop/unfold, and across the life of a relationship as it evolves. The process of SD is circular; SD does not necessarily move from non-disclosure to disclosure in a linear fashion. The end state of this process is not full disclosure....The process of SD is interdependent with processes of self-identity and relationship development....Finally, the process of SD is inherently dialectical; disclosure is governed by the dialectical tension between the need to reveal and the need to conceal. (p. 161)

There are values to self-disclosure. Values might include being involved in a decision-making processes, knowing how others feel about the decisions made by management, or being kept aware of potential downsizing. More importantly, I am interested in the quality and value of these self-disclosures in the workplace. Relationships developed out of these disclosures have their advantages. “Employees privy to the information-sharing, support, and decision making influence that occur in workplace friendships enjoy a distinct advantage over those left out of these relationships” (Sias, Smith & Avdeyeva, 2003, p. 322). In other words, employees who are made aware of the decisions being made and have the support from the employee sharing the information will have an advantage over the employee who does not know what has been shared or what decisions have been made within the organization (i.e., knowledge is power).

### Elements of Disclosure

Research has been done on the effects of self-disclosure over a period of time, which involves the mental process taking place during the progression of disclosure. Vanlear (1987) discusses Altman and Taylor’s (1973) social penetration theory (SPT). SPT identifies “each person’s personality as a series of concentric layers (like an onion skin) ranging from public accessible levels through semiprivate levels to private-personal core levels (depth)” (p. 300). Disclosure helps in the development of relationships because it guides the relationship in terms of breadth and depth. Breadth of disclosure describes how many topics the disclosure covers.

Depth of a disclosure describes how far into one's personal life a disclosure goes. Jourard (1971) suggests that, "once contact has been made between two persons, they proceed to 'uncover' themselves one to the other at a mutually regulated pace," (p. 17). Therefore, it allows members of the relationship to penetrate one's personality (Vanlear, 1987). Petronio (2002) explains that the expressive need hypothesis submits that the act of disclosure to others is itself rewarding and therefore fulfills an individual's need to express feelings and thoughts to others (Petronio, 2002). Seeking self-knowledge through disclosure is an alternative reason for revealing to others.

Furthermore, Vanlear (1987) discusses how the amount of disclosure given may "misrepresent" a person's social desirability due to their being unaware of the level of disclosure the receiver deems appropriate. Vanlear speculates on the nature of changes in disclosure over time:

There are several possible answers: (1) The various levels of disclosure could show simple linear trends; (2) the trends for the three levels could display a phasic sequence such that there is first a period of public disclosure followed by a period of increased semiprivate disclosures followed by private-personal disclosures; (3) disclosures could display a repetitive cyclical progression over time. As this discussion suggests, the nature of disclosure development over time has important theoretical implications because different descriptive developmental models may require different explanatory models. (p. 301)

In order for individuals to feel comfortable with the level of disclosure shared in the workplace the elements of an interpersonal self-disclosing event need to play an important role in the way the information is self-disclosed in the communication process and relationship development in a professional environment. What is to be said in a message being disclosed is one of the factors used in the thought process prior to disclosing information. Will the information be accepted or rejected? If I disclose this will it elicit a positive or a negative reaction?



Another content element is that of prerequisite conditions (Petronio, 2002, p. 48). The prerequisite conditions are in the category of the context of the interpersonal self-disclosure. Context of the interpersonal self-disclosure would be the situation in which the disclosure is given. Are my disclosures appropriate or inappropriate concerning the situation in which I am self-disclosing? To whom am I disclosing? Prerequisite conditions need to be present before individuals will disclose to others: Setting, receiver, sender; and relationship conditions. Following along those lines, the anticipated ramifications are what the discloser of the information foresees as a predicted outcome of each specific disclosure (Sargent et al., 1998, p. 4). Anticipation of what the discloser will share is going to depend on the way the information is delivered during a personal narrative.

#### Personal Narrative

Disclosures in the workplace are going to involve personal narratives. These personal narratives derive from the development of the workplace relationship through the appropriateness of shared messages. According to Markham Shaw (1997), personal narratives serve as representations of the roles people play and as the “masks” that they present as images of themselves. This plays an important part in our perceptions of self and others. The personal narrative is almost an indefinite part of our everyday lives. These narratives are expected as our social behavior (Markham Shaw, 1997).

Our self-concept, view of the other, and presentation of shared information is given through personal narratives as well (Markham Shaw, 1997). The receiver then determines whether or not the self-disclosed narrative is correct, has good intentions, and if it is appropriate or inappropriate. This is important to this project due to the type of information shared by co-

workers being studied. Narratives are a way of sharing personal (type) information in the workplace.

#### Five Dimensions of Self-disclosure

There are five dimensions of self-disclosure (Wheeless, 1976; Wheeless & Grotz, 1976). First is the dimension of valence, or positive and negative dimension of disclosure. The findings in the study by Wheeless and Grotz (1976) are that females disclose more negative information about themselves than males. If one is in disagreement with what is being said, then they will disclose how they feel towards the topic of conversation. This may seem negative to the receiver of the disclosure. Likewise, when one is in agreement with a certain topic of conversation, then they will simply state their agreement. In turn, this statement will be interpreted as a positive reaction to the topic being discussed.

Second is the honesty-accuracy dimension of disclosure. Gitter and Black (1976) found that intimate disclosures tended to be distorted more than non-intimate ones and friends received less distorted disclosures than did acquaintances. First impressions are everything unless a relationship has already been established. The first time an acquaintance is made it is not always deemed necessary to share all of the information that can be shared on a topic, hence the distortion of the information. A friend or intimate relationship may already know the full information being shared and therefore does not need all of the information being shared, which leads to the honesty-accuracy dimension.

The third dimension mentioned by the authors is the intent of the disclosure. There are some individuals who carefully select the target of the disclosed information whereas others will openly disclose to any person in their present environment. Intent of a message depends on what

the disclosing person wants out of the communicative activity. Information being shared may strengthen or weaken the interpersonal relationship.

The fourth dimension of disclosure is amount. Amount of disclosure means how much information is shared in terms of volume. How much one person knows about another person is going to depend on the amount of information shared. This also depends on if an open or closed question is asked of the discloser. An open question may result in a larger amount of information being shared. A closed question may result in a yes, no, or an unsure disclosure. Jourard (1971) suggests that, “the amount of personal information that one person is willing to disclose to another appears to be an index of the ‘closeness’ of the relationship, and of the affection, love, or trust that prevails between the two people,” (p. 13).

The final dimension is intimacy. For example, intimate information may include personal information about your personal relationships (family), finances, or other information that may require a professional counselor to assess. Intimacy level depends on how close one wants to be to another in an interpersonal relationship. If they want to feel closer to an individual, then they may ask for more personal information or disclose more personal information themselves.

#### Discloser Targets

Both content and context determine whether or not a disclosure will be perceived as appropriate or inappropriate. The recipient of the disclosure is going to determine what is appropriate. According to Derlega et al. (1993), individuals might be appropriate as disclosure recipients because of their acceptance of the discloser, skill in understanding the discloser’s message, motivation to help, and discretion (willingness to restrict access to and protect disclosures revealed in confidence). They add that some individuals might be inappropriate as

disclosure targets, not because they are indiscreet or untrustworthy, but because the nature of the social relationship between the discloser and the recipient creates complications.

Social relationships are prevalent in the workplace and are developed through the content and context of disclosures shared by co-workers. Workplace relationships develop by many other factors, too – many are task/work based. The messages shared between employees are imperative as to whether or not said employees will continue to develop a positive relationship over a period of time. Relationships are a work in progress no matter what environment they are developed in.

Communication in the workplace needs to be strategic in that what is said will be remembered by the receiver of the shared information. Sigman (1991) states that

Relationships do not cease after the face-to-face events (conversations) engaged in by co-members are terminated. In a sense, relationships are ‘larger’ than the physical presence or interactional accessibility of the participants. Social relationships can therefore be said to be continuous, or to be oriented to and produced as such by relationship partners. (Sigman, 1991, p. 108)

In other words, what is said in conversations will stay with the co-members of the face-to-face event until the next time they converse. This is important to my research because the information (content) shared in day-to-day conversations between co-workers determines how the long-term relationship will develop.

## Boundaries

We all want our privacy. It is up to us to determine whom we let in to our intimate circles of relationships. Therefore, we provide unmarked or invisible boundaries to those we wish to keep as friends and to those we wish to keep as just acquaintances. Dr. Sandra Petronio, in her book *Boundaries of Privacy: Dialectics of Disclosure* (2002), touches upon such subjects

as control and ownership, gendered criteria, risks and benefits, relational privacy, group boundaries, superior-subordinate boundaries, and fuzzy boundaries. These concepts are a part of her theory of Communication Privacy Management.

Petronio et al. (1998) believe that we draw lines in order to fit in our environment or setting. The things that we draw lines “around are those things that are important to us, and we control them by rules” (Petronio et al., 1998, p. 2). We have to be able to adapt to the environment in which we live in. This makes us adjust our boundaries so there is a certain element of assimilation. Integrating our boundaries with others’ boundaries helps us to be able to adapt to societal norms such as appropriate communication in the workplace. From here we are able to control our boundaries to find out if acquaintances at work have the potential of becoming friends.

#### Controlling Boundaries

People might protect their privacy boundaries to either protect the development of a relationship or de-escalate a relationship (Petronio, 2002). When a person stops a relationship or even a conversation from continuing they are maintaining a certain view of the relationship (Deetz, 1990, p. 235). On the other hand, when a person continues a relationship it can provide both advantages and security (Deetz, 1990). Some individuals might think stopping a relationship would provide those same advantages and securities. What about topics that are off limits to an individual? How is an individual to develop relationships with others without touching upon “taboo” topics? Petronio (2002) simply states that:

Individuals may be prompted to develop rules that regulate discussing certain topics because they fear bringing up unpleasant issues or disclosing disagreeable points could possibly halt the intensification of a close relationship. Alternatively, individuals may also be motivated to abstain from raising topics because they want to halt the development of a close relationship. (p. 50)

It is important to note that how these relationships develop is up to the individual. Being friendly with a co-worker and being friends with a co-worker are different from one another. Although a majority of the individuals we work with are acquaintances, friendships are fully capable of developing in the workplace. A workplace setting makes itself vulnerable to a variety of personalities. Therefore, the appropriateness of interpersonal self-disclosure in the workplace is going to be up to each individual's boundary setting. The problem is discriminating between categories of appropriate and inappropriate disclosures. There is an element of overlapping between the two categories.

### Boundary Settings

There are three main settings for boundaries in self-disclosure (Petronio, 2002). Individuals in a dyadic setting will most often be in either a relational or marital dyad. These individuals become a member of a dyadic boundary due to revealing or disclosing personal information in the first place. According to Petronio (2002), the most common boundary is relational. Derlega et al. (1993) argue that disclosure functions as a transformation agent for relationships of all kinds, but particularly for close relationships (Petronio, 2002, p. 137). This relates to the project due to the fact that closeness in co-worker relationships will be studied. It is also important to this project because proximity will be studied based on how it affects closeness in a workplace relationship.

The second boundary setting is that of group boundaries. These can be found at most any setting (e.g. school, church, family gatherings, and work). And with most group boundaries the majority of the differences are found between males and females. Who is most likely to disclose in a group setting? According to Petronio (2002), women disclose more in group settings. The amount disclosed by women in small groups is considerably larger than the men's disclosure

(Petronio, 2002). It is in dyads more than any other boundary setting where men are more likely to disclose information.

Organizations serve as a third boundary setting environment. All other boundaries are combined in the organizational boundary setting. The organizational setting serves as the roof over the relational and group settings. According to the literature (Bok, 1982; Roth, 1991; Steele, 1975), when affiliated with an organization, individuals manage personal, dyadic, and group boundaries in addition to those that surround private information belonging to the organization. Therefore, disclosure can either help or hinder an individual while in the work environment.

### Workplace Relationships

The element of workplace friendship comes from the sharing of appropriate information between co-workers. It is typically up to the individual as to how far a workplace relationship will develop. Appropriateness of the messages being shared may also be a factor.

Research has shown that there are many benefits to a healthy workplace relationship. “Workplace friendships involve mutual commitment, trust, and shared values or interests between people at work, in ways that go beyond mere acquaintanceship but that exclude romance” (Berman et al., 2002, p. 217). Workplace friendships are beneficial because they reduce workplace stress, increase communication, help employees and managers accomplish their tasks, and assist in the process of accepting organizational change (Berman et al., 2002).

Friendships sometimes develop out of workplace relationships. It is less stressful working with a friend than with an acquaintance. One is also less likely to communicate with an acquaintance as much as they would with a friend. The more available communication is the

more understanding there is among co-workers. Employees are more understanding of one another and adaptable to change when they have closer relationships.

Workplace friendships develop out of support. This kind of support “needs to be based on” such appeals as “shared values or shared experiences, as well as shared perceptions of trust, which are found in friendship” (Berman et al., 2002, p. 218). The decision-making process will be much smoother if co-workers share the same values and experiences with one another.

Some of the ways in which workplace friendships develop are similar to the ways in which social relationships develop. The main factors are proximity and shared experience (Berman et al., 2002). In terms of proximity, teamwork is one way in which individuals are put into a position where there are close working relationships. Teamwork provides opportunities for information sharing, which may lead to a closer friendship. Commonalities are found when the same experiences are shared among co-workers. This is especially true for employees who share the same tasks with one another in close proximity. They can then refer to the same tasks and shared experiences when determining how to interact with one another in the work environment.

Kapp and Barnett (1983) also helped to uncover the nature of the work peer relationship. They feel that good working relationships are necessary a company to reach its goals. Employees make the organization what it is. Depending on how an organization is structured individuals will typically cooperate better with those they can communicate and work well with on different tasks. “Task interdependence is the coordination of people, traditionally achieved through organization structure” (Kapp & Barnett, 1987, p. 240). This interdependence is typically found among employees who work horizontally with one another. Forms of important



communication such as this come through “face-to-face interaction among the organization’s members” (p. 240).

Workplace relationships are a part of the organizational culture which includes “shared attitudes toward the organization, its tasks, and goals” (Kapp & Barnett, 1987, p. 240). Through the work peer relationship a common workplace culture is developed. Management, according to Kapp and Barnett (1987), would be better off encouraging stronger work peer relationships due mostly to the theory of contingency. The less uncertainty there is in the workplace environment the better the organizational structure stands to be.

## Conclusions

It seems as though the individual receiving the message is the ultimate decision maker on what will be disclosed and whether or not it is appropriate or inappropriate. Interpersonal self-disclosure “depends” on the other. Each individual has boundaries set up to develop a relationship, protect a relationship, or even de-escalate a relationship. Everybody has the right to control who knows his or her personal information. When one is making the decision to reveal personal information in a dialogue the rules of the dyadic, group, and organizational boundaries usually are considered.

Individuals have different goals in mind when a disclosure takes place. This preliminary study will answer a number of questions in regards to the goals of interpersonal self-disclosure in a work environment. A major goal for a majority of the workforce is to get along with those they work with each day. One way of doing this is to develop healthy workplace relationships. Some of the workplace relationships will develop into friendships.

Some of the questions to be answered in this exploratory effort will determine where the line is to be drawn on where friendships begin or where working relationships stay the same in the workplace and how self-disclosure plays a role in those developing relationships. A healthy and comfortable work environment should be based broadly on communication. This is why interviews were conducted in order to study the effects of self-disclosure on workplace relationships.

Research questions for this study include: RQ1) What role does occupation and age play on information disclosed in the workplace? RQ2) Do shared tasks increase the amount and types of information disclosed and therefore increase the level of comfort one has with a co-worker? RQ3) How does appropriate or inappropriate self-disclosure affect an employee's comfort level? RQ4) How does the information disclosed by co-workers affect communication in the work environment?

The stages of this initial project include reviewing the literature and providing a background for solving the problem of appropriate communication in the workplace, developing a questionnaire, deciding on the demographics of the participants, recruiting participants, interviewing participants, recording results, and developing conclusions. Chapter two explains the methodology used in order to study the problem. Interviewing was the method used for this research because the subject matter relates to human communication. It was important to do interviews for this research in order to better explain any questions and to develop rapport with the participants so that their answers were more in-depth, and to provide an opportunity for participants to add more substance to their answers.

Chapter three reports the results of this study. The results are the participants' answers categorized by the previously mentioned research questions. There are numerous quotes taken

from the participants. These quotes are used in order to back up the results of the research questions.

Chapter four contains conclusions. It reviews the implications and reasoning behind this research based on the method and results of this study. This chapter also provides options for future research. Following chapter four is the appendix, which contains the questions used during the interviews.

## CHAPTER TWO

### METHOD

#### Introduction

Originally, there were to be twenty-four interviews in order to have an appropriate sample size. However, after interviewing eight males and eight females all from different occupations and ages it was found that there were similar answers to a majority of the questions. The participants were selected based on their working full-time for two or more years consistently in order the participants to have had a decent amount of time working with others. Participants were needed from different occupation and age groups. Interviews were going to originally be done in one hour. Actual interviews only lasted twenty to thirty minutes each.

A description of the participants and how/why they were recruited is provided in this chapter. The apparatus and its strengths and weaknesses are also discussed. Finally, the results portion of this research contains the description of what data or information is to be analyzed.

#### Procedure

An interview was used to find more in-depth answers than a closed answer survey in order to better explain the research for this study. Rubin, Rubin, and Piele (2005) describe an interview as the “best for gathering personal or sensitive information” (p. 227). Interviewing was important because some of the questions in the questionnaire may need further explaining. This research is about interpersonal self-disclosure so the interview method is relevant in order to dig deeper to find out more meaningful information. “Interviews also provide opportunities to establish rapport between the interviewer and the respondents, which can encourage respondents

to share more information than they would when completing a questionnaire” (Frey, Botan, Friedman, & Kreps, 1992, p. 126).

Interviews provide the researcher with the opportunity of “hearing the voices and experiences” of the participants who have actually been in the situations being studied in this research (Dickson, Hughes, & Walker, 2005, p. 70). This gives the researcher an opportunity to judge whether or not the participant understands the question or if it seems as though there is a need for further explanation of the question being asked. The interviewer “must be aware of respondent differences and must be flexible enough to make proper adjustments for unanticipated developments,” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 53).

Interviews were done primarily due to the nature of the research, which is generally based on interpersonal self-disclosures in the work environment. The information needed to complete this research may be quantifiable, but qualitative research was called for in order to find out more about what the participants think about what is and what is not appropriate for the workplace. When dealing with relationship development numbers do not always provide the exact answer needed to describe how the participants feel about or interpret their co-worker’s intended message.

## Participants

The participants were recruited using a random sampling method to provide a diverse occupational background, including businesses, schools, and a metal shop in the area surrounding Wichita, KS. No family members or close friends were used as participants in this research. Family members and close friends did, however, provide potential participants for the

researcher to use in the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured to each participant to help ensure their willingness to participate and fully respond to questions.

Participants were initially sent an email message describing the research, its importance, and the importance of their participation in helping to answer the research questions. This email also provided the potential participants with background to the study and why an interview was the chosen method for research. Each participant was reassured that their names and names of their place of work would not be identified during the presentation of the research. Also inside the email were the questions to be asked during the interview. The intent was to allow participants to preview the questions so that if they chose to be interviewed they would feel more comfortable with the entire process. Twenty-eight potential participants were emailed.

The pre-selected participants were given three days to respond, and to determine if they would take part in the study. Twenty-six participants agreed to be interviewed for the research. All but six interviews were done over the phone due to convenience for the interviewee. Using the phone as a way to interview participants, although not ideal, was essential in order to be able to interview all of the participants on a time schedule. This worked best for those unable to meet due to their busy work and family schedules. Interviewing over the phone was also a necessity for those participants who did not feel as comfortable interviewing in person as they did over the phone. Five of the interviews were done in the interviewee's place of work. One interview was done in a residence.

After the first twelve interviews a saturation point had been reached. "Saturation occurs when the interviews are not producing new information" (p. 71). However, the research needed a better balance of age and gender at that point. In order to fulfill a larger age range and more males, four additional interviews were administered in order to acute a balance. The final

demographic of the group include eight males and eight females. The ages ranged from twenty-four years of age to sixty-two years of age.

The occupation in which the participants worked was another part of the participant selection process. Occupations ranged from an auditor to a metal worker and a teacher to a lawyer. These occupations, along with the other occupations included in the study, were not chosen on purpose. In other words, there were no specific occupations in mind when setting out to conduct the research. It was more important to find a wide variety of occupations rather than certain positions. Salary ranges were not identified. Participants were asked to explain their level of education and type of work they did in their occupation, which helped the researcher understand the level of income they may receive (e.g. lower, middle, and upper class).

## Apparatus

The interviews were all administered from a questionnaire (Appendix). Questions that were asked focused on the categories of amount, type, and comfort level of disclosures. As discussed in the literature review, the afore-mentioned categories are important to the study of interpersonal self-disclosure. These questions were derived from the literature that exists. However, no specific questions were quoted directly from research found in the literature.

A total of nineteen questions were asked in relation to the difference between appropriate and inappropriate interpersonal self-disclosure in a work environment. Three questions focused on the amount of disclosure. These questions were asked in order find out how much is too much information, according to the participants. Another reason for the “amount” questions was to find out the impact shared information had on the development of the workplace relationship and in some cases friendship.

Four questions were asked about the type of disclosure. Participants were asked what type of disclosure was given by the sender of the information. This information is helpful to understand where the appropriateness of communication in the workplace becomes important in the development of co-worker relationships.

Five questions were asked about the level of the work relationship in accordance with self-disclosure in the workplace. Finding out how close a participant is with their co-workers due to self-disclosure is imperative to this study. Without these questions one would not know the comfort level a participant had with his or her co-workers.

Two questions were asked about both type and level related to disclosure. There was a call for this kind of question due to the type of the disclosure affecting the comfort level in the workplace relationship. The question first asked what type of information was disclosed and then what level of comfort they felt in dealing with this disclosure.

There were four relational questions and one task-oriented questions asked in order to identify how self-disclosure affected work relationships with the co-workers of the participants. Some of the participant's occupations leaned towards the relational side of work. Other participants were in occupations that did not provide as much of an opportunity for relationship development due to the heavy task-oriented work they do. It was important to ask this type of question to better understand the occupational demographic.

## Strengths

This type of research really calls for a way in which to find out more in-depth answers than one might find in statistical or quantitative data. The interviews allowed for participants to elaborate on their answers rather than answering close-ended questions with a yes or a no.



Interviews were a good choice because if a participant did not understand a question the researcher could rephrase the question in a way that would be more understandable to the participant. Questions could also be better explained with an example.

According to Berger (1998), an interview is “conducted to get at particular issues, such as hidden feelings or attitudes and beliefs of which a respondent may not be aware or that are only dimly in his or her consciousness” (p. 55). Intimacy of an interview coincides with helping to find out the feelings of a participant. “The more intimate approach may serve to relax respondents,” (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 91).

When dealing with human subjects and their opinion, values and personal relationships a humanistic approach to communication research is ideal. Participants will feel more apt to respond with full, descriptive answers to another person rather than filling out a bubble sheet and mailing it back to the researcher. Surveys may help to quantify the type of television shows a family might watch, for example, but interviews help us to understand why they watch those television shows (Frey et al., 1992). Once the participant is aware of the importance of the research to the researcher they begin to share more information (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Sixteen participants were a sufficient number for the needs of this study due to the relational aspect of the research. While additional interviews might provide more information, the interviews began to return less new information as the saturation point was reached. Participants were asked the same questions without any coaxing to push them to a certain answer. Answers were given and accepted for what they were. Once a saturation point had been reached it seemed to be unnecessary to attempt to interview additional participants. A diversity of age was achieved as well as multiple occupations. There were eight males and eight females interviewed in order to have equal perspective in terms of gender.

## Weaknesses

While there are several strengths, there also are a few weaknesses of interview research. First, qualitative research (including interviews) is harder to back up or defend compared to quantitative research. In other words, qualitative interview research does not provide “hard data” to work. One could argue that the number of interviews done is not sufficient to warrant any “hard data” or to provide any “real” answers (Berger, 1998) to support any theory as to how interpersonal self-disclosure affects the work environment. However, one would not know what to look for in terms of “hard data” without an interview as a cornerstone for the surveys to be mass produced to respondents.

Second, human subjects are unpredictable. It is relatively more difficult to put statistical data on human subjects or participants due to the unpredictability of a human subject. When dealing with the interviewing of human subjects one opens themselves up to how that participant is feeling at the time of the interview. Are they in the mood to answer your questions in full? Will any of the questions cause them to give a faulty answer in order to avoid embarrassment? Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) suggest that the more the interviewer becomes a part of the interview, the more the respondent will provide answers they think the interviewer wants to hear. These are some of the things to consider when setting out to utilize interviews as the research method for one’s study. These concerns were addressed by establishing rapport with the participants to a point where they felt comfortable with the fact that they were not to be identified by name or by the organization they work for. Rapport was also established by the researcher sharing the story of why this research was being done.

Third, it can be more difficult to find participants willing to be interviewed for a study depending on the subject matter of the research. This could be said for any study done on human

subjects. Therefore, it could take more time to find participants, which would slow down the timeline of the research. Setting up a time and place to interview could also interfere with the timeline of the research. These concerns were minimized by offering to administer the interview in the way in which the respondents felt most comfortable, whether that be in their office, the researcher's office, at a place of residence, or over the phone. Having the participants choose where or how to do the interview benefited their schedule, which reduced the amount of time that would have been needed to set up interviews coordinated with work and family schedules.

The majority of these interviews in this method were done over the phone for convenience to the participants involved. Some participants preferred to be interviewed in person. One could look at this as an inconsistency. None the less, the interviews were conducted person to person and not through a piece of paper with a name on it instead of a face or a voice to back it up.

## Data Analysis

The information collected from the interviewees was analyzed in terms of the types of disclosure, amount of disclosure, intimacy level of disclosure, relational aspect of the disclosure, and the task-oriented aspect of the disclosure. Times and places of the disclosures will also be analyzed along with to whom the disclosure was given and the person's relationship to the discloser. All of this information will help answer the research questions posed for this project.

The answers are analyzed in accordance with the themes emerging from the research questions. Answers are analyzed in terms of how the respondents view the relational results of shared tasks while at work. Participants' answers are also being examined to find out if their comfort level in the workplace is really affected by the type of communication used by their co-

workers. It is also important to study the participants' answers in terms of the communication flow as a whole is affected by self-disclosure. All of this information is unpacked by doing an in-depth analysis of the content of the answers provided by the participants.

The difference among age, gender, and occupation plays a role in how this information is unpacked. Male descriptions of a close work relationship are compared to female descriptions of the same event. Similar comparisons are made with age and occupation to look for other differences. This helps one to understand how the work environment itself affects the development of healthy or appropriate work relationships.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESULTS

The results discuss the answers given by the participants. Answers given by participants are discussed in terms of their demographics and how those demographics and their answers relate to the research questions. Furthermore, the answers relevant to each research question being discussed are quoted from the participants' interview answers. This much can be expected from this chapter.

Themes have emerged based of the issues covered in the research questions discussed in the first chapter. Those questions are RQ1) What role does occupation and age play on information disclosed in the workplace? RQ2) Do shared tasks increase the amount and types of information disclosed and therefore increase the level of comfort one has with a co-worker? RQ3) How does appropriate or inappropriate self-disclosure affect an employee's comfort level? RQ4) How does the information disclosed by co-workers affect communication in the work environment? The demographics chosen in this research played very important roles in how themes emerged. Age, gender, and occupation were imperative when interpreting the results of the questions. Each of the research questions are unpacked in terms of the demographics used in this study. Along with how the demographics affected the research questions will be some examples of the differences between how the participants answered the questions.

To fully appreciate the results from the interviews, it is important to keep the age and occupation of each participant in mind. The occupations of the participants involved with this study include: financial analyst, marketer, teacher, accountant, auditor, firefighter, office manager, three public high school counselors, engineer, repairman, private high school

counselor, nurse, florist, and metal shop deliverer. Age ranged from twenty-four to sixty-two. For the remainder of the research question results there is discussion of age, gender, or occupation when deemed appropriate to the question.

RQ1: What role does occupation and age play on information disclosed in the workplace?

From the different types of occupations studied there are people at all different ages. Some of them are in their twenties while others are in their fifties. It seemed as though the age range did not affect the type of information disclosed in a work environment. A twenty-seven year old marketer said the communication in her workplace was “relatively informal.” On that same note a fifty-four year old repairman indicated that the communication in his workplace was “informal for the most part.” The formality of the communication in the workplace will depend on the occupation.

An opportunity to disclose will depend on the task-orientation in the job. Age was not a determinate since the occupations were the regulators of face-time where disclosures are more likely to occur. Another comment on this was made by the forty-four year old female public high school counselor, who said, “With my closest co-workers, I share a lot – probably too much. I am not a real private person.” The twenty-four year old financial analyst added, “We communicate quite often throughout the week. We talk about what is going on, sports, kids, etc. It’s a nice break throughout the day.”

One important result of this research was to clarify the scope of appropriate (and inappropriate) workplace communication. Both a thirty-six year old male public high school counselor and a twenty-eight year old male auditor felt that appropriate workplace communication involved any information discussed about the work being done. For instance,

the thirty-six year old male public high school counselor said, “Most of my communication in the workplace revolves only around work. Usually, this is dissemination of information, planning, or discussing new ideas to help at work.” As the twenty-eight year old male auditor said, “Discussing our current projects, communicating with clients, and communication with attorneys would be appropriate.”

Ten participants specifically indicated discussion of work or the tasks being done at work to be the most appropriate form of communication in a work environment. One stated, “Appropriate communication at the station would be to discuss training and fire-related business from 7 a.m. – 5 p.m. during our workday.” The other eight participants felt as though everyday conversation such as hobbies and what activities one did on the previous weekend would be appropriate communication in the workplace. As the twenty-four year old male financial analyst said, “I share things that are going on in my life that are good, maybe like buying a house or my wife getting pregnant. I also might talk about something that I had done on the weekend that might have been interesting.” Age did not appear to affect this conclusion.

Not all ten of the participants who chose work as a discussion topic were in the same decade as far as age range, and not all eight of those participants choosing to talk about their hobbies or weekends were found in only one decade or age range. It has already been quoted that the twenty-four year old male financial analyst finds discussing the weekend as an appropriate discussion topic. Another example of this was stated by the forty-nine year old male engineer as, “Discussions revolving around tasks on projects, light family plans for the weekend and other issues would be considered appropriate.”

Almost all participants indicated that anything to do with an intimate relationship between significant others would be inappropriate. An example would be when the forty-nine

year old male engineer commented that inappropriate communication would include, “sexual preferences or references that include religious and racial overtones.” A similar remark was made by the thirty-one year old female office manager who said that “talking about anything related to [personal] finances, intimate relationship details, and gossip” would be considered inappropriate communication in the workplace.

There were other participants who felt as though anything related to personal finances made others in the workplace feel uncomfortable. The twenty-eight year old accountant said that there is a “woman in my office who always talks about her and her husband’s finances – we’ve got this much in the bank, retirement, etc., and that makes me feel uncomfortable.” Others felt that anything that could be found offensive to races or an individual’s physical appearance is inappropriate. “Inappropriate communication to me is anything where another individual is being harassed whether verbally, physically, or racially,” said the thirty year old firefighter. A twenty-seven year old marketer felt the same stating that, “speaking derogatively about someone of a different gender, race, sexual orientation, or disabled should be considered as inappropriate communication.”

Thus far, for the first research question, the results found that the occupation does not have more to do with the type of information being shared rather than age. Participants also were asked to discuss conflict management at work. It has been made apparent through the answers given by participants that neither occupation nor age plays a major role on information disclosed in the workplace. For instance, the thirty-seven year old male public high school counselor said about sharing information in the workplace that he felt “very comfortable” within his department, but not as comfortable sharing information outside the department he worked in. Another example would be when the twenty-eight year old accountant said, “I feel as though I



could discuss a serious personal issue with my boss, but I believe personal issues should be kept at home and vice versa.” These results indicate that the information disclosed in the workplace will depend on the individual choosing to disclose and to whom they are disclosing the information.

Conflict can be seen as inappropriate workplace disclosure, but it can also be a part of the job. When asked how they communicated with someone they were having a conflict with, the answers varied. Twelve out of the sixteen participants interviewed will talk to the co-worker they are having a conflict with directly about what their conflict is about. The other four participants chose to avoid the conflict.

Neither age nor occupation appeared to play a role in how conflict was dealt with in the workplace. This could be seen in how the forty-nine year old male engineer stated, “I try to work the issue out privately. If that is unsuccessful or the behavior continues, then I bring their first level supervisor into the problem.” That statement is similar to how the twenty-seven year old teacher handled workplace conflict, which was also handled directly rather than indirectly. “I choose to handle the conflict immediately rather than ignore it. I go directly to the person in which I am having a conflict and try to discuss it with them.”

RQ2: Do shared tasks increase the amount and types of information disclosed and therefore increase the level of comfort one has with a co-worker?

Questions ten through fourteen addressed comfort level and disclosure. Participants were asked to describe the relationship they have with the co-worker they feel closest to. Then, a follow up question about the tasks shared with this closest co-worker was asked. Following these two questions participants were asked to describe the relationship with the co-worker they feel least close to. Finally, each participant was asked what tasks were shared with the least-

close co-worker. These questions were asked toward the middle of the interview, which proved to be beneficial. Questions leading up to these provided participants with the opportunity to begin to think about their co-workers.

Gender and age played a large role in interpreting this series of answers. Some of the male participants (the sixty-two year old metal shop deliverer, the fifty-four year old repairman, and the forty-nine year old engineer) answered the question as to how they would describe the relationship with the co-worker they feel closest to in two or three words such as “good” and “honest” and “open.” The female participants for the most part decided to go into more detail on the relationship and what type of communication exists between the two co-workers. For men, the older respondents were most likely to use two or three words for their answers, while younger men used more. Younger male participants ages thirty-seven and younger went into a little bit more detail than the older male participants. For instance, the twenty-eight year old male auditor described his closest workplace relationship by saying,

“I have a close relationship with the two guys I work for most during the year. The relationship is mainly focused on work and work is the focus of most of our discussions. However, they know a lot about my personal life and I know a lot about theirs. I would feel comfortable going to either of them with a problem I have at work or outside of work.”

This example of how a younger male responded to the closer work relationship question is quite different than how the sixty-two year old male metal shop deliverer answered the same question by saying, “It’s really good.” Female participants would describe their closest co-worker relationships in terms of family or best friend. A thirty-one year old female office manager said, “I would describe her as a friend and mother figure” to the same question relating to the closer work relationship. Another example of the difference with the female answer would be when the

forty-four year old female public high school counselor described her closest co-worker as her “best friend.”

Most respondents perform similar tasks as those they described as their closest co-workers. They worked in tight quarters with one another and either shared equal tasks, worked for one, or supervised the other. As the twenty-eight year old female accountant stated,

“I feel closest to my boss. I believe we have a good working and personal relationship. I feel comfortable going to him with work as well as personal problems. I will say that I have hesitated speaking to him regarding issues with his management style because I don’t want it to affect our friendship.”

The thirty-six year old male public high school counselor said that, “We are in close proximity to each other and must work together on a lot of projects.”

Results from the question relating to the co-worker participants found to be least close to were interesting. Regarding the least close co-worker, the twenty-eight year old female accountant said,

“I feel least close to one individual in particular but it is because I chose to distance myself from this person. I have seen this individual buddy up with other co-workers then stab them in the back. This person can also be very hard to work with if you make them angry. I choose not to talk to this individual about anything personal. I limit our conversations to work related items only.”

The typical responses to the least close co-worker were not similar to that of the twenty-eight year old female accountant. For instance, the fifty-four year old male repairman said of the least close co-worker, “I would say it is still fairly good.” Another example would be how the fifty-five year old female private school counselor said of her similar relationship, “It’s friendly but not one of great respect.”

A majority of the co-workers the participants felt least close to were viewed as someone they had the potential to have conflict with. The answer to the question as to what tasks they shared with the least close co-worker typically indicated that there were little to absolutely no

tasks shared with these people. This does not prove that if these people did share tasks that they would become closer and share more personal information with one another. It does indicate a conflict in personality. Participants responding on the least close co-worker indicated that they did not share the exact same tasks. A different set of tasks or job within the same organization may require a different type of personality, which fits said set of tasks or job.

Relationships with the co-workers the participants felt closer to were developed by the sharing of personal information. Proximity to one another enabled information sharing. The twenty-seven year old female marketer stated,

“We share an office, so talking just is natural when you are in a space that small. Also, my dad has passed away from cancer and her mom was ill with cancer when I started working with her. So, I was able to empathize and understand what she was going through in her life.”

Nearness was used to explain relationships for other respondents, too. The thirty year old firefighter described a close co-worker relationship by stating how “it became close by training, making calls together, being together when on an individual basis, as a group, and when we have been at our most vulnerable.”

A majority of the participants, when discussing the co-worker they were closest to, both in terms of a workplace relationship and in proximity, seemed to enjoy talking about the co-worker as more of a friend than a co-worker. It did not seem as though they were wasting any work time while developing this relationship due to the fact that they were sharing tasks. An example of this would be when the twenty-eight year old male auditor said, “Working together in small groups for months at a time for approximately fifty to seventy hours a week develops relationships fairly quickly. Also, I have traveled out of town on business with these guys so you spend ten to twelve hours at work together and then eat dinner together as well.” Another example was when the thirty year old firefighter added, “It became close by training, making

calls together, being together when individual basis, as a group, and when we have been at our most vulnerable.”

When the participants had to discuss the individual they felt least close to they did not seem to know them well enough to have a deep hatred towards them. They seemed to just know less about said co-worker due to dissimilar tasks operated on in the work environment. For instance, the twenty-seven year old teacher said, “I do not have to work with her on any tasks.” Additionally, the thirty-six year old male public high school counselor indicated, “It is very rare that we work together on any project.”

RQ3: How does appropriate or inappropriate self-disclosure affect an employee’s comfort level?

There were some great responses to the comfort level questions offered by the participants during the interviews. However, only two of the participants said they were able to share personal information with everyone they work with. “I feel very comfortable sharing information,” stated the fifty-nine year old florist. “We are mostly women.” The thirty year old firefighter stated the same only due to the proximity of his work with fellow firefighters and the time spent with them. “Being in the station for twenty-four hours at a time leaves no secrets between the guys. We work every third day no matter what. To that end we really share everything together.” This relates to comfort level and how it is affected by self-disclosure in that the previous two occupations quoted are occupations in which tasks are shared constantly forcing individuals to communicate with one another, which involves the sharing and disclosing of information.

A majority of the participants were not constantly forced to communicate due to shared tasks. Most respondents tended to only share personal information with a few co-workers or

none at all. “I feel very comfortable sharing information with a few people,” indicated the fifty-five year old private high school counselor. The same could be said for the thirty-one year old office manager who stated that she felt “fairly comfortable with two or three people” when disclosing personal information in the work environment.

Interviewees also were asked about the most comfortable and least comfortable moment while they were working. There were only two participants who did not describe their most comfortable and least comfortable situation as a communicative situation. A majority of the participants described their comfort level at work in terms of communication. The least comfortable moments tended to be moments where they were new on the job and did not know anyone. Similarly, the twenty-seven year old female teacher said,

“When I started working at this school, a group of ladies was standing in the hallway watching me. I accidentally went down the wrong hallway to get to my new classroom, and they all started laughing at me. One of the ladies told the other members of the group that I must be stupid if I can’t figure out where my classroom is located.”

Another example of the least comfortable moment was when the thirty year old firefighter stated that the moment was “my entire rookie year.”

Times where participants were most comfortable at work include when the forty-four year old female public high school counselor said, “I feel most comfortable when visiting with a student about the college application process and the financial aid process. I just felt like I was making a small difference for that student and their future.” Another example is explained by the twenty-eight year old female accountant by stating, “I was having some female related medical issues for which I was going to have to miss a couple of days of work. My boss is a male, but I still felt very comfortable going to him and explaining why I needed the time off.”

Apparently, the comfort level among co-workers did develop due to disclosure of what seems to be appropriate disclosures in the work environment. My research found three broad themes for appropriate workplace disclosure (see Table 3.1).

TABLE 3.1  
EXAMPLES OF APPROPRIATE WORKPLACE DISCLOSURE

A. Work-related Communication - "I have found that there is more than one way to handle this project."
B. Hobbies - "I plan on fishing as much as possible this weekend."
C. Positive Announcements - "My wife and I are going to be grandparents!"

Mostly work-related disclosures occurred, according to the participants. "We have weekly meetings with my boss and my assistant and we do brainstorming," indicated the twenty-seven year old female marketer. "I love to do this, and it is a comfortable environment to give recommendations and my boss is awesome about giving feedback. It is also nice to all be able to come together and communicate our ideas and come up with a great product." Work-related communication can also mean just doing the work you are supposed to be doing, which can make you feel comfortable. "I am the most comfortable when I'm doing the work I am good at," stated the fifty-nine year old female florist.

The fifty-nine year old female florist was not the only participant in her age range who felt more comfortable just doing the work they love to do rather than involving a communicative situation that makes them more comfortable. "There really hasn't been a time where I wasn't comfortable," said the fifty-four year old male repairman. "I do what I like." This same sentiment was given by the sixty-two year old male metal shop deliverer who said, "I feel good about my job everyday. I have freedom. I don't get any crap." These participants may be more

comfortable because they are not required to disclose information in the work environment on a daily basis.

There are times when too much information is shared and it lowers the level of comfort between co-workers. This is one kind of information that may be deemed inappropriate for the work environment. The only answer given in this light was provided by the twenty-eight year old female accountant when she explained,

“One of my co-workers told me she had been abused as a child. Nothing in our conversation related to child abuse or relationships. In fact, it was my birthday and someone had wished me a happy birthday, which prompted her to start talking about her birthday and how her mother didn’t want her and was abusive to her. It was very uncomfortable because I was unsure of how to respond and it was a total birthday buzz kill.”

As this information suggests, the workplace can become an uncomfortable place due to the wrong information being disclosed. In the course of my research I found four broad themes of inappropriate workplace disclosure as seen in Table 3.2.

TABLE 3.2

EXAMPLES OF INAPPROPRIATE WORKPLACE DISCLOSURE

A. Sexual Relationships - “My wife and I were up all night long if you know what I mean.”
B. Personal Finances - “We went ahead bought the most expensive T.V. in the store.”
C. Personal Problems - “My husband and I are in the beginnings of a messy divorce.”
D. Gossip - “I heard that they were the reason for all the layoffs.”

RQ4: How does the information disclosed by co-workers affect communication in the work environment?

This question was asked in terms of how participants handled self-disclosures from individuals whom are sharing personal information, which may have required a professional



counselor or psychiatrist. All but one of the participants explained a situation like this. Their responses were to “listen” to the co-worker and not “judge” them in any way. “I offer some advice without ignoring the situation,” said the thirty-one year old female office manager. “I try to be sympathetic. At the same time I try not to judge them.” Fourteen of the participants did suggest to the co-worker that they would need to seek professional help. “I just tell them they probably need to find someone who can help them,” stated the fifty-four year old male repairman. “I would refer them to the hotlines mentioned in training.”

There are situations at work when one has to deal with conflict. Participants were asked how they appropriately communicated with someone they have a conflict with. Fourteen participants said they go directly to the person they are having a conflict with and solve the conflict on an interpersonal level. The participants were repeatedly stating the same way in which they would use communication to solve the conflicts. “I am pretty direct, but will talk to the person in private and work out the issue to find a solution that works for both of us,” stated the twenty-seven year old female marketer. It seemed to be the same for different occupations and different ages. “I try to work the issue out privately, if that is unsuccessful or the behavior continues, then I bring their first level supervisor into the problem,” declared the forty-nine year old male engineer.

Solving conflicts in the workplace involved participants having to disclose information about how they felt about the situation and the co-worker they were having a conflict with, according to participant responses. “I muster up the courage and use ‘I’ statements when I confront them,” said the forty-four year old public high school counselor. “This way they don’t become defensive.” The appropriateness of the communication used in a conflict situation is important so that those receiving the disclosure of statements about how the participant feels

towards them during the conflict do not feel as though they are being singled out. “I wait until I think about what I am going to say,” stated the fifty-nine year old female florist. “I then try to choose a time to talk.”

These results have given an indication of how important appropriate interpersonal self-disclosure in a work environment can be to employees. Results from this study have taken a look at the work environments for different occupations of eight males and eight females ranging in ages from twenty-four to sixty-two years old. The results have also shown the impact proximity and shared tasks have on the amount of disclosures and the level of comfort that follows those disclosures. Implications and conclusions will be discussed in the final chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONCLUSIONS

What is considered appropriate workplace communication and what is considered to be inappropriate workplace communication is a gray area. The problem is discriminating between what is appropriate and inappropriate self-disclosure in the workplace. Research was done on this topic in order to discover how different occupations, ages, and genders felt about the appropriateness of amounts and types of self-disclosures and how it affected their comfort level while in the workplace.

The difference between appropriate and inappropriate interpersonal self-disclosure in a work environment can be seen in the way individuals choose to develop healthy work relationships. Participants indicated the type of interpersonal self-disclosure they deemed inappropriate in the workplace. It did not seem to matter what the age, occupation, or gender of the participant was in terms of what they found to be inappropriate in the workplace. Topics such as sexual relationships, personal finances, or serious personal problems should not be disclosed to the average co-worker within the work environment. This much can be concluded across the board of sixteen participants.

Participants also uniformly agree about what constitutes appropriate disclosure in the workplace. The participants would agree that anything work-related would be appropriate communication in the work environment. This much is easy to conclude. Other appropriate topics include what individuals did on the weekend, their hobbies, and relatively non-intimate disclosures on how an individual's family is doing.

However, not everything was the same across all the demographics represented among the participants. The older the participant was (mostly males) the less they seemed to disclose. Females disclosed more personal information than males. Different occupations such as marketing and firefighting provided more of an opportunity for work relationships to develop. Occupations with a work environment conducive to closer proximity in daily tasks made it easier for closer work relationships to develop. Other occupations such as repairman and metal shop deliverer were not favorable for a closer work relationship to develop due to more individualistic work.

Close work relationships usually developed between co-workers that shared a similar task. Individuals, for the most part, chose the person they shared tasks with the most to be their closest work relationship. Some of those co-workers were described as a best friend or were considered as part of their family. These types of work relationships would be considered healthy. Participants enjoyed working with these individuals. This is not to say that those co-workers who participants did not feel close to were hated or dreaded. Individuals participants did not feel close to did not typically share the same tasks in the workplace as the participant being interviewed. Everything discussed on the basis of work relationships was situational.

The amount and type of self-disclosure depended on the co-worker it would be disclosed to and whether or not the disclosure would produce a reciprocal disclosure in return. Some individuals the participants worked with had made the decision to share more intimate details about their personal lives making the work environment a lot less comfortable. At times there were conflicts which arose out of inappropriate disclosures in the workplace about other co-workers or sometimes the participant. Situations where conflict came about were solved quicker and more efficiently by addressing the conflict directly rather than avoiding it all together.

## Implications

First, this research is helpful to workers and managers as they facilitate healthy and productive workplaces. The research done on the topic of the difference between appropriate and inappropriate interpersonal self-disclosure in a work environment is applicable to any employee who has felt uncomfortable with any of their co-workers. Part of any job is understanding and communicating with co-workers. In most occupations, every employee is a part of a team. Individuals have separate tasks, which enable their organization to be successful.

When an employee knows and understands how to handle uncomfortable situations, or is aware of them before they occur, then they will be a more complete employee and a more satisfied employee. This research was done in order to show the importance of interpersonal workplace relationship training. The type of training mentioned here is more important for new employees rather than older, established employees. New employees should be introduced to the types of appropriate and inappropriate communication in the work environment. It should be conducive to the work environment itself due to each occupation differing from the other. Employees should enjoy their work, and they should enjoy who they work with no matter what their individual differences may be.

Think of this form of training as a communication tool to be placed in the workplace communication tool belt. When armed with the appropriate responses to an individual's inappropriate self-disclosure employees are sure to solve problems or uncomfortable situations faster than letting them slip by as the norm in the workplace. If an individual is disclosing personal information, which makes another employee uncomfortable, then the employee should feel empowered to suggest that the individual try to find a professional to help them as they are

not willing or able to provide sound advice for their problem. This depends. Not all inappropriate disclosures require professional help. Some situations call for the receiver of the disclosure to address the topic being disclosed as inappropriate in order to get the message across to the discloser that the topic is not what they feel comfortable discussing in the workplace.

The bottom line is this: If an individual can perform their work-related tasks without the knowledge of certain interpersonal self-disclosures, then the disclosure is not necessary. When a disclosure will impact the well-being of a work relationship and positively impact the work environment at the same time, then the disclosure could be deemed appropriate. Appropriate communication, by nature, is situational. How appropriate it will be to a co-worker one does not feel close to may be completely different from how appropriate a co-worker one does feel close to. Different work environments call for different modes of communication, which entails appropriate communication for that particular workplace.

Second, this research helps managers to be more aware of the implications of proximity and shared tasks and how those two topics converge in order to compel employees to self-disclose on an interpersonal level. Disclosing on this level allows for work relationships to develop. How they develop is going to depend on the task and relational abilities of the employees in close proximity with one another.

We do not choose to be friends with all of the individuals we work with. This can be said for those we work with in close proximity. However, it is going to depend on whom you are “friendly” with and who you are “friends” with in the workplace. Proximity allows work relationships to develop into real friendships. As managers become more aware of these implications they may want to provide literature for their employees on what is considered to be appropriate communication in the work setting of the organization. Employees working in close

proximity are typically going to be more isolated from the rest of the organizational team. Therefore, how their workplace relationship develops is going to depend on them. With the appropriate guidelines for these employees managers will hopefully be able to manage any workplace conflicts among employees who share tasks in close proximity.

### Limitations

How else could this information have been analyzed? The obvious answer would be to do a quantitative study. Handing out a multiple choice questionnaire to a larger sample might be seen as more effective in getting definite answers. A larger sample size may be reached in a qualitative study as well. If an ethnography were done, it might have found a lot more anecdotes to apply to the current study. Questions from the interview questionnaire used in the present study could be adjusted to fit into a direct mail survey.

This was a small sample from a single city with limited occupations. A larger sample size from multiple cities in regions other than the Midwest may provide a more in-depth view for this research. A larger sample size initiates the availability of a larger sample of occupations. More occupations would have provided this research with a greater number of perspectives on disclosure in the workplace.

### Future Research

These are some possible ways in which to take this research to another level. However, they may not be as personable or as in-depth as an interview. Whatever the new method would be to research the difference between appropriate and inappropriate interpersonal self-disclosure in a work environment it needs to be done in a way that is beneficial to employees and managers in

a wide variety of occupations and organizations. This research is important for any manager who desires satisfied employees in the workplace.

Age could be a larger issue than revealed in this exploratory research. Researching younger groups more heavily could provide a background for a possibility of intergenerational conflict down the line. There seems to be more and more ways of communicating through technology, which takes away from the interpersonal contact in the workplace. How will this affect older generations in the future who are used to more face-to-face contact than younger generations? This form of research could provide a larger foundation for managers to see how the importance of appropriate workplace communication could affect the generational gap among employees.



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## APPENDIX

APPENDIX  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

How would you describe the formality of communication in your workplace?

To what extent do you feel comfortable in discussing personal issues in your workplace?

How would you describe the relationship between you and your co-workers horizontally from your position?

How often during the month do you socialize with co-workers outside of the workplace?

How often during the week do you socialize with co-workers during work-hours?

What kind of personal information would you consider to be too personal for the workplace?

To what extent do you share personal information with co-workers?

Please, give me some examples of appropriate workplace communication.

Please, give me some examples of inappropriate workplace communication (excluding any information that would lead to sexual harassment).

How would you describe the relationship you have with the co-worker to whom you feel closest to?

How did this relationship develop?

What kinds of tasks do you or have you shared with this co-worker?

How would you describe the relationship you have with the co-worker to whom you feel least close to?

What kinds of tasks do you or have you shared with this co-worker?

Describe the moment at work you felt the most comfortable.

Describe the moment at work you felt the least comfortable.

How do you handle self-disclosures from individuals whom are sharing personal information, which may require a professional counselor?

How do you communicate with someone you are having a conflict with?

How do you communicate with a co-worker (horizontally to you) whom consistently does not seek your help and has problems communicating when they do need your help?