

## 1.4: Social Penetration Theory

### Learning Objectives

1. Discuss social penetration theory, self-disclosure, and the principles of self-disclosure
2. Describe interpersonal relations

How do you get to know other people? If the answer springs immediately to mind, we're getting somewhere: communication. Communication allows us to share experiences, come to know ourselves and others, and form relationships, but it requires time and effort. You don't get to know someone in a day, a month, or even a year. At the same time, you are coming to know them, they are changing, adapting, and growing—and so are you. When groups come together people get to know each other and start the trust-building process. When we do not take the time to get to know each other, and focus simply on the task at hand, the group often suffers.

Altman and Taylor, (Altman, I., & Taylor, D. (1973). *Social penetration: The development of interpersonal relationships*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press) describe this progression from superficial to intimate levels of communication in social penetration theory, which is often called the Onion Theory because the model looks like an onion and involves layers that are peeled away. According to the social penetration theory, we fear that which we do not know. That includes people. Strangers go from being unknown to known through a series of steps that we can observe through conversational interactions. People come together in groups and teams and do amazing things.

If we didn't have the weather to talk about, what would we say? People across cultures use a variety of signals to indicate neutral or submissive stances in relation to each other. A wave, a nod, or a spoken reference about a beautiful day can indicate an open, approachable stance rather than a guarded, defensive posture. At the outermost layer of the onion, in this model, there is only that which we can observe. We can observe the characteristics of each other and make judgments, but they are educated guesses at best. Our nonverbal displays of affiliation, like a team jacket, a uniform, or a badge, may communicate something about us, but we only peel away a layer when we engage in conversation, oral or written.

As we move from public to private information we make the transition from small talk to substantial, and eventually intimate, conversations. Communication requires trust and that often takes time. Beginnings are fragile times and when expectations, roles, and ways of communicating are not clear, misunderstandings can occur. Some relationships may never proceed past observations on the weather, while others may explore controversial topics like politics or religion. A married couple that has spent countless years together may be able to finish each other's sentences, and as memory fades, the retelling of stories may serve to bond and reinforce the relationship. Increasingly intimate knowledge and levels of trust are achieved over time, involving frequency of interaction and well as length and quality. Positive interactions may lead to more positive interactions, while negative ones may lead to less overall interaction.

This may appear to be common sense at first, but let's examine an example. You are new to a position and your supervisor has been in his or her role for a number of years. Some people at the same level as you within the organization enjoy a level of knowledge and ease of interaction with your supervisor that you lack. They may have had more time and interactions with the supervisor, but you can still use this theory to gain trust and build a healthy relationship. Recognize that you are unknown to your supervisor, and they to you. Start with superficial conversations that are neutral and non-threatening, but that demonstrate a willingness to engage in communication. Silence early in a relationship can be a sign of respect, but it can also send the message that you are fearful, shy, or lack confidence. It can be interpreted as an unwillingness to communicate, and may actually discourage interaction. If the supervisor picks up the conversation, keep your responses short and light. If not, keep an upbeat attitude and mention the weather.

Over time the conversations may gradually grow to cross topics beyond the scope of the office, and a relationship may form that involves trust. To a degree, you and your co-workers learn to predict one another's responses and relax in the knowledge of mutual respect. If, however, you skip from superficial to intimate topics too quickly, you run the risk of violating normative expectations. Trust takes time, and with can come empathy and understanding, but if you share with your supervisor your personal struggles on day one, it may erode your credibility. According to the social penetration theory, people go from superficial to intimate conversations as trust develops through repeated, positive interactions. Self-disclosure is "information, thoughts, or feelings we tell others about ourselves that they would not otherwise know." (McLean, S. (2005). *The basics of interpersonal communication*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon. pp. 112). Taking it step by step, and not rushing to self-disclose or asking personal questions too soon, can help develop positive business relationships.

## Principles of Self-Disclosure

Write down five terms that describe your personal self, and five terms that describe your professional self. Once you have completed your two lists, compare the results. They may have points that overlap or may have words that describe you in your distinct roles that are quite different. This difference can be easy to address, but at times it can be a challenge to maintain. How much of “you” do you share in the workplace? Our personal and professional lives don’t exist independently, and in many ways are interdependent.

How do people know more about us? We communicate information about ourselves, whether or not we are aware of it. You cannot not communicate. (Watzlawick, P. (1993). *The language of change: elements of therapeutic communication*. New York, NY: Norton & Company). From your internal monologue and intrapersonal to communication, to verbal and nonverbal communication, communication is constantly occurring. What do you communicate about yourself by the clothes (or brands) you wear, the tattoos you display, or the piercing you remove before you enter the workplace? Self-disclosure is a process by which you intentionally communicate information to others, but can involve unintentional, but revealing slips. Beebe, Beebe, and Redmond (Beebe, S., Beebe, S., & Redmond, M. (2002). *Interpersonal communication relating to others* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon) offer us five principles of self-disclosure that remind us that communication is an integral part of any business or organizational setting. Let’s discuss them one by one.

### Self-Disclosure Usually Moves in Small Steps

Would you come to work on your first day wearing a large purple hat? If you knew that office attire was primarily brown and gray suits? Most people would say, “of course not!” as there is a normative expectation for dress, sometimes called a dress code. After you have worked within the organization, earned trust and established credibility, and earned your place in the community, the purple hat might be positively received with a sense of humor. But if you haven’t yet earned your place, your fashion statement may be poorly received. In the same way, personal information is normally reserved for those of confidence, and earned over time. Take small steps as you come to know your colleagues, taking care to make sure who you are does not speak louder than what you say.

### Self-Disclosure Moves from Impersonal to Intimate Information

So you decided against wearing the purple hat to work on your first day, but after a successful first week you went out with friends from your college days. You shut down the bar late in the evening and paid for it on Sunday. At work on Monday, is it a wise strategy to share the finer tips of the drinking games you played on Saturday night? Again, most people would say, “of course not!” It has nothing to do with work and only makes you look immature. Some people have serious substance abuse issues, and your stories could sound insensitive, producing a negative impact. How would you know, as you don’t really know your co-workers yet? In the same way, it is not a wise strategy to post photos from the weekend’s escapades on your Snapchat, TikTok, Facebook, or similar social networking web page. Employers are increasingly aware of their employees’ web pages, and the picture of you looking stupid may come to mind when your supervisor is considering you for a promotion. You represent yourself, but you also represent your company and its reputation. If you don’t represent it well, you run the risk of not representing it at all.

### Self-Disclosure Is Reciprocal

Monday morning brings the opportunity to tell all sorts of stories about the weekend, and since you’ve wisely decided to leave any references to the bar in the past, you may instead choose the wise conversational strategy of asking questions. You may ask your co-workers what they did, what it was like, who they met, and where they went, but eventually, all conversations form a circle that comes back to you. The dance between source and receiver isn’t linear, it’s transactional. After a couple of stories, sooner or later, you’ll hear the question “What did you do this weekend?” It’s now your turn. This aspect of conversation is universal. We expect when we reveal something about ourselves that others will reciprocate. The dyadic effect is the formal term for this process and is often thought to meet the need to reduce uncertainty about conversational partners. If you stay quiet or decline to answer after everyone else has taken a turn, what will happen? They may be put off at first, they may invent stories and let their imaginations run wild, or they may reject you. It may be subtle at first, but reciprocity is expected.

You have the choice of what to reveal, and when. You may choose to describe your weekend by describing friends and conversations while omitting any reference to the bar. You may choose to focus on your Sunday afternoon gardening activities. You may just say you read a good book and mention the title of the one you are reading. Regardless of what option you choose, you have the freedom and responsibility within the dyadic effect to reciprocate, but you have a degree of control. You can learn to anticipate when your turn will come and to give some thought to what you will say before the moment arrives.

## Self-Disclosure Involves Risk

If you decided to go with the “good book” option, or perhaps mention that you watched a movie, you just ran the risk that whatever you are reading or watching may be criticized. If the book you are enjoying is controversial, you might anticipate a bit of a debate, but if you mentioned a romance novel or one that has a science fiction theme, you may have thought it wouldn’t generate criticism. Sometimes the most innocent reference or comment can produce conflict when the conversational partners have little prior history. At the same time, nothing ventured, nothing gained. How are you going to discover that the person you work with appreciates the same author or genre if you don’t share that information? Self-disclosure involves risk but can produce positive results.

## Self-Disclosure Involves Trust

Before you mention the title of the book or movie you saw this weekend, you may consider your audience and what you know about them. If you’ve only known them for a week, your awareness of their habits, quirks, likes, and dislikes may be limited. At the same time, if you feel safe and relatively secure, you may test the waters with a reference to the genre but not the author. You may also decide that it is just a book, and they can take it or leave it.

“Trust is the ability to place confidence in or rely on the character or truth of someone.” (McLean, S. (2005). *The basics of interpersonal communication*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon. pp 114). Trust is a process, not a badge to be earned. It takes time to develop and can be lost in a moment. Even if you don’t agree with your co-worker, understand that self-revelation communicates a measure of trust and confidence. Respect that confidence, and respect yourself.

Also, consider the nature of the information. Some information communicated in confidence must see the light of day. Sexual harassment, fraud, theft, and abuse are all issues in the workplace, and if you become aware of these behaviors you will have a responsibility to report them according to your organization’s procedures. A professional understands that trust is built over time and understands how valuable this intangible commodity can be to success.

## Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal communication can be defined as communication between two people, but the definition fails to capture the essence of a relationship. This broad definition is useful when we compare it to intrapersonal communication, or communication with ourselves, as opposed to mass communication, or communication with a large audience, but it requires clarification. The developmental view of interpersonal communication places emphasis on the relationship, rather than the size of the audience, and draws a distinction between impersonal and personal interactions.

For example, one day your co-worker and best friend, Iris, whom you’ve come to know on a personal as well as a professional level, gets promoted to the position of manager. She didn’t tell you ahead of time because it wasn’t certain, and she didn’t know how to bring up the possible change of roles. Your relationship with Iris will change as your roles transform. Her perspective will change, and so will yours. You may stay friends, or she may not have as much time for after-hours activities as she once did. Over time you and Iris gradually grow apart, spending less time together. You eventually lose touch. What is the status of your relationship?

If you have ever had even a minor interpersonal transaction such as buying a cup of coffee from a clerk, you know that some people can be personable, but does that mean you’ve developed a relationship within the transaction process? For many people, the transaction is an impersonal experience, however pleasant. What is the difference between the brief interaction of a transaction and the interactions you periodically have with your colleague Iris who is now your manager?

The developmental view places an emphasis on the prior history but also focuses on the level of familiarity and trust. Over time and with increased frequency, we form bonds or relationships with people, and if that time and frequency are diminished, we lose that familiarity. The relationship with the clerk may be impersonal, but so can the relationship with the manager after time has passed and the familiarity is lost. From a developmental view, interpersonal communication can exist across this range of experience and interaction.

Review the lists you made for Introductory Exercise #3 at the beginning of this chapter. If you evaluate your list of what is important to you, will you find objects or relationships? You may value your home or vehicle, but for most people, relationships with friends and family are at the top of the list. Interpersonal relationships take time and effort to form, and they can be challenging. All relationships are dynamic, meaning that they transform and adapt to changes within the context and environment. They require effort and sacrifice, and at times give rise to the question: why bother? A short answer may be that we as humans are compelled to form bonds, but it still fails to answer the question, why?

Uncertainty theory states that we choose to know more about others with whom we have interactions in order to reduce or resolve the anxiety associated with the unknown. (Berger, C., & Calabrese, R. (1975). Some explorations in initial interactions and beyond: toward a developmental theory of interpersonal communication. *Human Communication Research*, 1, 99–112. Berger, C. (1986). Response uncertain outcome values in predicted relationships: uncertainty reduction theory then and now. *Human Communication Research*, 13, 34–38. Gudykunst, W. (1995) Anxiety/uncertainty management theory. In R. W. Wiseman (Ed.), *Intercultural communication theory* (pp. 8–58). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage). The more we know about others, and become accustomed to how they communicate, the better we can predict how they will interact with us in future contexts. If you learn that Monday mornings are never a good time for your supervisor, you quickly learn to schedule meetings later in the week. The predicted outcome value theory asserts that not only do we want to reduce uncertainty, we also want to maximize our possible benefit from the association. (Sunnafrank, M. (1986). Predicted outcome value during initial interactions: a reformulation of uncertainty reduction theory. *Human Communication Research*, 3–33. Sunnafrank, M. (1990). Predicted outcome value and uncertainty reduction theory: a test of competing perspective. *Human Communication Theory*, 17, 76–150. Kellerman, K., & Reynolds, R. (1990). when ignorance is bliss: the role of motivation to reduce uncertainty in uncertainty reduction theory. *Human Communication Research*, 17, 5–75.) This theory would predict that you would choose Tuesday or later for a meeting in order to maximize the potential for positive interaction and any possible rewards that may result. One theory involves the avoidance of fear while the other focuses on the pursuit of a reward, and together they provide a point of reference as we continue our discussion on interpersonal relationships.

Regardless of whether we focus on collaboration or competition, we can see that interpersonal communication is necessary for the business environment. We want to know our place and role within the organization, accurately predict those within our proximity, and create a sense of safety and belonging. Family for many is the first experience in interpersonal relationships, but as we develop professionally, our relationships at work may take on many of the attributes we associate with family communication. We look to each other with similar sibling rivalries, competition for attention and resources, and support. The workplace and our peers can become as close, or closer, than our birth families, with similar challenges and rewards.

## Key Takeaways

- Interpersonal relationships are an important part of the work environment.
- We come to know one another gradually.
- Self-disclosure involves risk and reward and is a normal part of communication.

### Exercise 1.4.1

1. Write down five terms that describe your personal self, and five terms that describe your professional self. Compare your results with a classmate.
2. Think of someone you trust and who trusts you. How did you come to have a mutually trusting relationship? Did it take effort on both people's part? Discuss your thoughts with a classmate.
3. How important do you think self-disclosure is in business settings? Give some examples. Discuss your thoughts with a classmate.

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