Openness vs. Personal Confession
Bob Crosby

To operate at their peak, both individuals and organizations need to be open. Only with openness does data flow through organizations with the speed and clarity needed to cope with change. But the concept of openness can sound threatening when people confuse being open with personal confession.

There is a vital difference between these two concepts. The following exercise will help you to clarify the difference. Openness is about clearly describing what is happening now. Personal confession, on the other hand, is the sharing of private, personal information about one's self. It is often about past events.

With openness feedback is very specific, clear, descriptive, and timely:

"I liked the fact that you condensed your summary to one page."

In personal confession people talk about their personal life. Conversation in a personal confession is from one's private, internal experience.

With openness the data that flows deals with the immediate situation:

"You're asking me for this report by Wednesday noon, but I do not think I can finish it by then."

That is the openness organizations need.

With personal confession norms predominating, such feedback is often withheld for fear of hurting feelings, being hurt, or being too personal.

Such confusion between openness (which organizations need) and personal confession (which is appropriate with a counselor or differentiated friend) tends to encourage closed behavior that negatively affects organizations.

Exercise

With the above as background, take a few minutes with this exercise to distinguish between personal confession and openness. Here are 10 items followed by an explanation. Put a check mark if you think the statement is an example of openness; leave it blank if you think it illustrates personal confession.

1. _____ "Damn it Joe, I expected your report an hour ago!"

   Congratulations if you put a check mark here. To be open in the purest sense, a statement reflects the speaker's feelings and is specific about the activity. While "Damn it Joe" does not contain a feeling word (e.g., I'm angry), the hearer will easily get the message if the tone fits.

   In real life tone and words often do not match. Perhaps the speaker has trouble being clear about feelings and therefore says, "Damn it Joe," in a light, jovial way.
Such a double message is often sent. When tone and message do not match, people usually believe the tone.

If the tone were jovial, the facial expressions would be too—some 86% of communication is facial/tonal. The outcome of a series of communications where such a facial/tonal message conflicts with the words is that the sender eventually explodes with, "I've told you this over and over!" The receiver responds, "I thought you were kidding!"

(Of course, tone is not present in this exercise, so let us assume that tone and words match when doing this exercise.)

2. _____ "I've always had trouble being on time."
   No check here. This is a personal confession of one's history. As the statement stands, you cannot tell whether the speaker is defending or is upset with him/herself, or what. You also are not sure whether the reference is to a specific lateness or whether it is simply a general statement.

3. _____ "Frankly, I'm having a rough time with my marriage."
   No check here. This is clearly a personal confession. We are not claiming that personal confessions are not sometimes appropriate to share. We are claiming that the mainstream sharing of information at work should be openness about work activities and their effect on you and others.

   Occasionally private, personal sharing is important, but one should clearly know the difference and know that the result of sharing personal information is that the relationship with the hearer shifts, temporarily. Of course, giving skeletal personal family information to a boss when seeking time off may be wise. Also sharing about a tough personal situation with a friend can be very important to one's emotional health.

4. _____ "Thanks for getting those estimates to me on time and well documented."
   Yes, a check here! The feelings are clearly inferred by the "thanks," and the work activity is spelled out. Furthermore, this example illustrates why openness is important in organizations. Openness is about dataflow. Data must flow accurately, on time, in the form needed, and with clear expectations.

5. _____ "I'm beginning to tune out with all the details in your report."
   A check belongs here. Feelings are clear and specific about the activity.

6. _____ "You're irresponsible."
   No check here. This is a parental statement. No feelings are shared though one certainly can infer negative ones. Mainly missing is specificity. This is an excellent example of a projective statement that will evoke defensiveness and probably a
counter-attack. If the hearer is subordinate, the counter-attack will likely be out of the hearing of the superior.

Actually, this is neither open nor a personal confession. It is an accusation. It is an unintended confession by the one who charges, "You're irresponsible." It says that responsibility is a big word in the speaker's life history. Another observer might say, "You're selfish." Still another, "You're forthright" and another, "You're courageous." And the irony is that all these responses might be evoked by the same behavior.

In the movie, Twelve Angry Men, all of the jurors project unresolved issues in their own lives onto the young man on trial. This eye of the beholder phenomena is at work whether the speaker calls the other person "irresponsible," "selfish," "forthright," or "courageous." These accusations tell us not about the person spoken to but about the person speaking. That is why we call it a projective statement.

7. _____ "I work best when you tell me expected results first, cost estimates second, and the project plans third."
   Yes, a check. Another excellent example of the direct relationship between openness and productivity/quality.

8. _____ "I'm seeing a counselor regularly."
   No check. This is clearly a personal confession.

9. _____ "I like the way we solved the problem of that production issue."
   Yes, a check. There is specificity about both feelings and the activity.

10. _____ "It's important to me to have the delivery made at the expected time or to be given a day's notice of a possible delay."
    Yes, a check. Once again, specificity about feelings ("important to me" infers the feeling) and the activity.

That completes the exercise, but there is more about the discrepancy between tonal/facial expressions and words. First, do this: Say, "Thanks a lot," in a sarcastic tone. That will illustrate how much more powerful tone is than words. Of course, nobody would feel thanked with such a tone.

The point is not to try to match your tone to the words but to believe the tone and realize that the words need to be re-examined. Unrehearsed tone does not lie. So, when the words and tone do not match, review the words if you want to be true to yourself. Review them to discover what you truly believe about the issue at hand.
On Being Authentic

One of the greatest gifts one can give oneself is to take a deep breath and reflect on feedback; it is the pause that refreshes and cleanses the stress of duplicity from life. So, change words to match tone, not vice versa. Reassess the truth about yourself revealed through your tone.

Being an authentic person is to be one whose tone and words match not by faking tone but by being clear about the words you want to say. You may believe that such authenticity is not practical or possible in your situation. So be it! The words on this page and the openness prescribed in this book are for those who are choosing to "be the truth" in openness. Then your tone and words will match without theatrics. As Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, put it, "The truth consists, not in knowing the truth, but in being the truth."

The Challenge of Learning Openness

Openness is essential if data is to flow freely through organizations. Learning openness requires training in differentiation. Differentiation is a prerequisite skill not only to resolve but also to utilize conflict well.

To be open is to be specific, concrete, and nonjudgmental rather than general and judgmental. A primary commitment of a person in an open organization is to "tell it like it is"—not in the old school sense of being judgmental and accusative but in the new sense of being specific and nonjudgmental and toward the end of achieving the organizational mission. A true leader is the one who will describe life's situations without blaming others. The goal is to make it work rather than find fault or blame.

Differentiated training goes beyond that which all but the boldest organizations care to take on today. But the willingness to take on such training will define those organizations that are the most productive while also being the most humane. We need to have folks whose skills go beyond just those needed to get minimal work done. We need to equip a manager to become a mentor, a teacher, a wise person, who by word, tone, and deed plays the very heart and soul of an open, productive organization. And that manager will balance management authority and employee influence.

Our thanks to Ronald Lippitt for helping shift the concept "managing conflict" to "utilizing conflict." He wisely saw that differences of opinion are potential riches to be mined or utilized—not simply "managed" to reduce the conflict.


1 Note: John Wallen did the initial work in this area. Robert Crosby teamed with Wallen in the late 60s and early 70s in a series of Laboratory Training Sessions. This adaptation uses examples from industry.