

Self-Disclosure at Work: Strengthening Team Bonds and Communication

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How much do you reveal about yourself at work? Do you treat information on a “need-to-know” basis? Or do you blurt out personal details and later wish you

could take them back?

Self-disclosure at work can be tricky, scary – and powerful.

Why does it matter? Because co-workers sharing more about themselves is part of the alchemy of building stronger, more trusting relationships. And BetterUp research shows that when employees form more and deeper connections at work, they benefit and so do their teams.

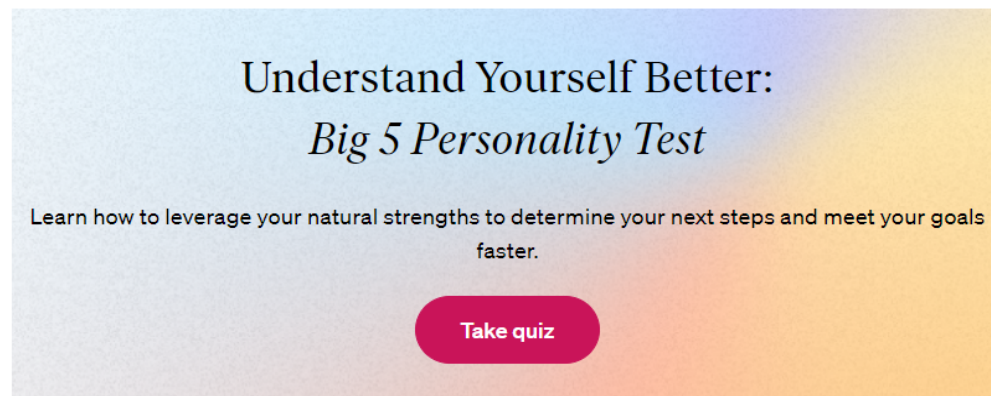
If you're a manager, it's important to make building more connected teams a priority. That starts with modeling the behavior by being your authentic true self at work. And that means getting comfortable with a certain amount of self-disclosure.

But don't worry. Disclosing more about yourself doesn't mean oversharing or baring your soul to colleagues.

Yet as self-disclosure at work becomes more common and even encouraged, you're bound to have questions.

How do you know what's appropriate vs. TMI? As people and HR managers, how do you create a psychologically safe space for healthy self-disclosure?

In this article, we'll define self-disclosure, consider common questions, and look at the importance of self-disclosure at work. We'll also consider the many benefits of using it at work, as well as the pitfalls and some tips for avoiding them. Then we'll walk through some steps for how to foster self-disclosure on your teams, and the connections that come with it.



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What is self-disclosure?

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), self disclosure is:

"...the act of revealing personal or private information about yourself to other people. In relationships research, self-disclosure has been shown to foster feelings of closeness and intimacy."

Sharing your thoughts, desires, and feelings with others is another form of self-disclosure.

It's also important to remember that you self-disclose through both verbal and non-verbal cues



Key characteristics of effective self-disclosure

To make an impact, self-disclosure usually needs to be personal and intentional. Risk and trust are also important factors at play, which is why it can be so powerful. Self-disclosure doesn't always include all four characteristics. But to be effective in building strong interpersonal relationships, it usually involves these aspects.

Intentionality

Self-disclosure needs to come across as natural to be viewed as authentic. But it also should be intentional. When leaders share something about themselves or feelings on purpose, they're more likely to achieve their goal.

For example, a personal story can help put others at ease or demonstrate understanding for how they feel. When people are being intentional and authentic, their tone of voice, facial expression, and other body language are in tune with their message. They provide validation. However, when their words don't match their nonverbal cues, they can unintentionally convey an opinion or feeling they didn't want to reveal. These and other accidental acts of self-disclosure undermine trust. They can also promote misunderstandings.

Personal

When people share information that doesn't reveal something more about them than is commonly known, then it's not viewed as self-disclosure. Yet depending on the situation, the information doesn't need to be deeply personal to make an impact. Often, being personal and specific can be enough to help people get to know each other or to find something in common. For example, colleagues might start bonding after finding out they both love rock climbing or are avid connoisseurs of dark chocolate.

Risk and trust

Some of the most meaningful acts of self-disclosure involve a certain level of risk and trust, which go hand-in-hand. Risk is there when leaders share something that makes them vulnerable. It may be an embarrassing or significant mistake they once made on the job. It could be a difficult situation at home. Or maybe they're worried about a project or presentation. In the process of disclosure, they're taking a risk and demonstrating that they trust those they're sharing with.

When combined, these characteristics of self-disclosure help connections

grow over time.

The 7 rules of self-disclosure

There are no written rules of self-disclosure, per se. There's no set formula for how much we should disclose about ourselves. The level of intimacy changes from person to person and situation to situation.

But we can all benefit from some guidelines.

We've all had a colleague who overshared, and thought, "Gosh, I wish he hadn't told me that." Or maybe you regret overstepping a boundary earlier in your career.

We also want to work with people who know and care about each other. We want to be able to support each other during tough times. We can't do that if we haven't created a safe environment for sharing about personal topics.

If you're a manager or leader, how you handle self-disclosure is more important than ever in setting the tone.

But mastering self-disclosure can be challenging for leaders at any career stage. It's hard to find that spot where we're sharing just enough, but not too much.

These seven guidelines can help you move your team forward with more effective self-disclosure.

1. Develop self-awareness

Getting comfortable with self-disclosure starts with a foundation of healthy self-awareness. Before disclosing personal information, people need to correctly perceive how others see them. Effective self-disclosure requires the ability to read the room. Without accurate self-perception, it's hard to understand how others may react. Otherwise, personal anecdotes risk falling flat or even offending. Coaching is a safe way to begin developing self-awareness. Asking coworkers for honest feedback is another important step.

2. Keep it relevant

Before getting personal, good communicators consider if it's relevant and appropriate to the situation. Will it be helpful in communicating the point more effectively? Strong leaders know when to share the right type of personal story to inspire others and motivate a team.

3. Consider cultural and organizational context

Norms around personal sharing vary widely across cultures and organizations. Even within the United States, attitudes about openness differ regionally. Savvy communicators get a sense of the culture before sharing personal

information. They factor in gender, culture, and position. They pay attention to the other person's level of self-disclosure and allow them to take the lead.

4. Be aware of timing and length

Skilled communicators seem to know just the right time to share a personal experience. They know how much to disclose and how soon. Stories make more impact when kept brief and to the point. Valued coworkers respect each other's time. They avoid long-winded stories and skip extraneous details.

5. Delay or avoid highly personal disclosures

Sharing extremely personal information can risk careers. It also can make others feel uncomfortable. Keep it professional. Intimate information does not belong at work. It's always best to take the time to think it through first. A coach can serve as a sounding board to help decide whether to share sensitive information.

6. Be honest

Effective self-disclosure is always the truth. It also avoids exaggeration. Employees don't trust leaders or coworkers who aren't genuine. Sharing fabricated or embellished personal stories will backfire.

7. Reciprocate

To be effective in building trust and connections, self-disclosure needs to be mutual. Productive working relationships only grow closer when personal sharing goes both ways.



How self-disclosure functions in the workplace

As an integral part of [building trusting relationships](#), self-disclosure plays an essential role at work. The implications are even greater with increased remote and [hybrid work](#) models. Harvard Business professor Dr. Tsedal Neeley writes that leaders must work harder to earn trust when they can't be face-to-face. Her book, "[Remote Work Revolution: Succeeding from Anywhere](#)," explores how self-disclosure helps do that.

"Emotional trust is grounded in the understanding and the belief that people care about you, that they care about your interests, that they care about your difficulties, that your concerns are their concerns. They care about your aspirations," said Dr. Neeley during an [APA podcast on remote and hybrid work](#). "The way to develop that, it's actually quite simple, is to be able to have mutual self-disclosure, people sharing of themselves."

In some ways, the shift to working from home opened the door to more self-disclosure. The division between work and home life transitioned from a solid door to a sheer curtain. But with less time at the office, there were also fewer opportunities for spontaneous sharing. This led to a crisis of connection during the pandemic.

Why care about the state of connection? Because, when [your workforce is lonely and disconnected, it hurts your business](#). Employees want connection, and they need social support at work. Without it, they lose the motivation to help each other. They stop extending trust or taking risks. They lose the energy needed to get past hard problems and work through misunderstandings.

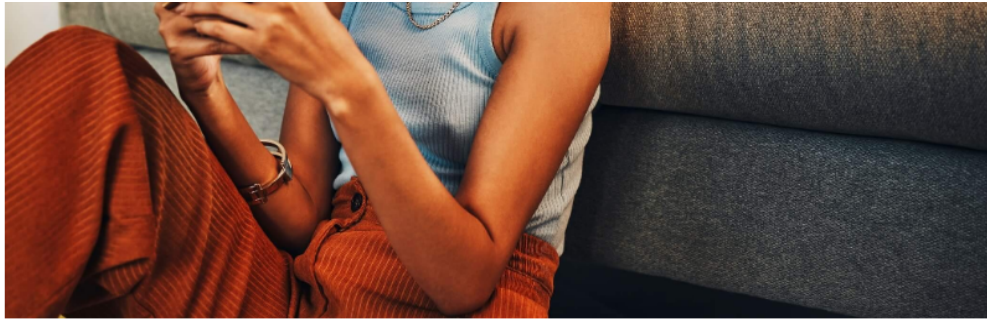
Employees who feel isolated lose their commitment to each other, the organization, and even the customer.

That's why managers and leaders need to better understand self-disclosure. Because it's one of the building blocks of relationships and connection. After all, BetterUp researchers found that [workers who build more and stronger connections reap benefits and so do their teams](#):

- 92% more professional growth
- 59% more positive relationships
- 34% greater goal attainment
- 36% boost in well-being

Self-disclosure is only one factor in forming connections, but it's one of the keys.





The benefits and risks of fostering self-disclosure at work

We've touched on the potential rewards and pitfalls that come with self-disclosure in the workplace. Now let's look deeper at each side.

Benefits of self-disclosure at work

- Stronger relationships. Co-workers who care about each other are more motivated and productive. They also are more willing to work past individual differences to find common ground.
- Deeper trust. Employees who trust their leaders and co-workers are more loyal and engaged. They tend to stay longer, boosting retention.
- Better mental well-being. BetterUp data shows that connections at work improve mental health. When people share more about themselves they make more friends. And employees with workplace friends experienced less stress. This pattern was 32 times as strong compared to workers with more acquaintances than friends. They also enjoyed greater belonging and engagement.
- Likability and approachability. Psychological research shows people who engage in self-disclosure are seen as more likable and approachable. Productivity goes up when co-workers feel comfortable asking managers and other team members for help and advice.
- People grow more. Coworkers who are friends look out for each other. They are more likely to mentor and help friends through work struggles. Friends at work can also help build each other's self-esteem and encourage personal growth.
- Morale improves. More friends, more fun, and more support boosts employee morale. Teams with a strong spirit of comradery have more fun on the job. This helps with employee retention and builds an employer's brand.
- More effective communications. When co-workers have strong rapport, it's easier to share feedback and ideas. Better communication will help increase productivity on your whole team.

Risks of self-disclosure at work

- Sharing too much, too soon. Social media may have normalized sharing highly personal information for anyone to see. But sharing personal and intimate details can make coworkers uncomfortable. It's best to save this type of disclosure for close work friends or intimate relationships outside work.
- Gossip. When private information is shared, this can sometimes lead to gossip. Managers and employees who practice ethical self-disclosure avoid spreading negative gossip about any coworker.
- Lack of boundaries. The more teams share, the more boundaries can get blurred. Intimate self-disclosure is not appropriate in the workplace. People need to feel free from emotional disruptions while working. It's important for leaders to demonstrate clear boundaries, so team members feel psychologically safe.
- Cultural misunderstandings. Everyone grows up with a different culture around what's considered private and what's fair game. Some families share everything. Others demand privacy. When people get personal, how others interpret the meaning depends on their background.
- Good intentions can backfire. Even when someone shares a story to be helpful, it can sometimes have the opposite effect. Coworkers need to practice self-awareness and read the room before sharing.

How to foster self-disclosure that respects employee boundaries

Research has shown that managers have the most significant influence over the employee experience. This also includes employee sense of belonging as well as their growth and performance. Managers build connection through the opportunities they create and the behaviors they model. Part of that includes fostering self-disclosure in a way that feels safe and natural.

Here are some ways to encourage the type of self-disclosure that promotes connection on your team:

Model appropriate self-disclosure

Employees follow the example set by their leaders. When you're willing to be open about your own foibles, others feel more comfortable sharing their own. At the same time, you want to demonstrate professionalism and avoid oversharing. If you tend to be more reserved about sharing, this is a good topic to bring up with a coach. As a leader, be clear about what your intent is in sharing a story. It should be to build trust and deepen your relationship with the team, not to unburden yourself. When a manager uses self-disclosure appropriately, the team has a model for how to share and be supportive with each other.

Watch your nonverbal cues

One of the keys to creating an authentic and deep connection with your team is [effective nonverbal communication](#). Your body language, tone of voice, and attitude can make a much bigger impact than what you actually say. When someone gets personal, make sure your nonverbal cues demonstrate support, respect, and [empathy](#).

Create a psychologically safe environment

For leaders, speaking out can be less important than how you react and respond to other team members. The term [psychological safety was coined](#) by Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson. She defines it as “[a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking](#).” Inclusive managers establish a climate where people feel safe to be themselves. They should be able to share openly without fear of embarrassment or criticism.

Make time and space for informal communications

Without time for informal chats and spontaneous exchanges, your team won't have much chance to get to know each other. Create opportunities with quick check-ins and [icebreakers](#) at the beginning of team meetings. Welcome questions and requests for help. Be accessible. When you take time for [informal communications](#), team members will mirror your behavior with each other.

Be an active listener

[Listening is every bit as important in good communications](#) as being a skilled speaker. Give employees time to express their feelings and tune into their [communication style](#). They may pause or get stuck when they're sharing something difficult. Be patient and supportive. Tell them to take their time. Let them know you're listening and that you understand their feelings. Handled well, these are the times when you build deeper trust and form the closest bonds.

Provide access to personalized coaching

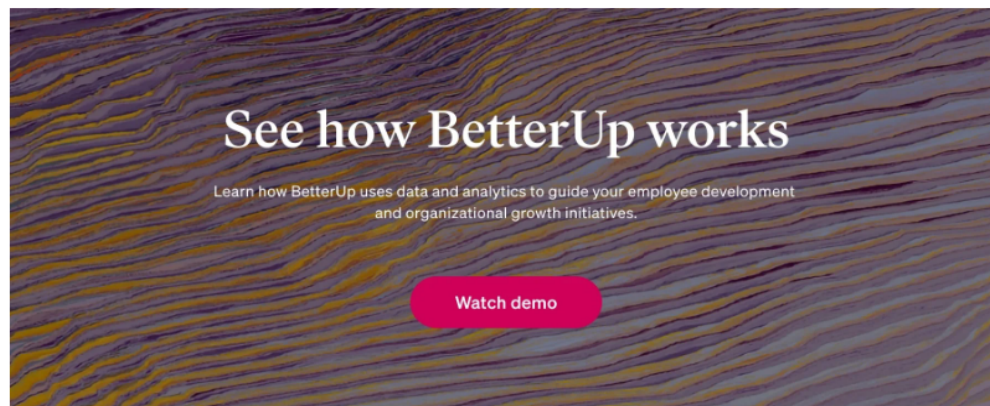
Engaging in appropriate self-disclosure involves authenticity and [emotional intelligence](#), or EI. [Being emotionally aware](#) is a significant part of navigating personal and difficult topics. And it's during times of change and crisis that employees especially need to share their fears with someone they trust. [Research shows that a certified coach can help employees develop more resilience and authenticity, and even thrive against uncertainty.](#)

Encourage participation in supportive communities

Many companies help workers form more connections through [Employee Resource Groups](#). ERGs create a safe, supportive space for employees who share a common identity or interest. For example, ERGs represent [working parents](#), veterans, and groups of different race, gender, family status and other backgrounds.

There may also be activity groups like community service, sports, and public speaking clubs. Groups like these offer opportunities for social networking and bonding over common concerns. Leaders and managers can encourage employees to participate. They do this by building awareness and allowing time to attend group meetings. They can also support participation by asking coworkers to share about their ERG experiences with the team.

The process of developing closer relationships through self-disclosure is a journey. The [social penetration theory](#) states that as relationships develop, communication moves from relatively shallow, non-intimate levels to deeper, more personal ones. It shouldn't be forced or rushed. As managers look for strategies to help strengthen their teams, they help foster an environment where employees can get to know each other and build closer bonds.



COLLABORATION



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