

The New Johari Window

#25. Quadrant Three: The Hidden/Protected Area

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The third quadrant is all about privacy and disclosure. This is the hidden dimension of interpersonal relationships. What is known to self and not known to others is the private, hidden or (I suggest in the New Johari Window) “protected” realm. Here discretion reigns.

Struggle for Control

While discretion and protection are of primary importance in Quad Three, it is important not to overlook an even more fundamental challenge operating in this quadrant. It is in Quad Three that we so vividly see the tension between internal and external control of self. This quadrant is all about the extent to which I can control the swirling potential for disclosure that sets the stage for leakage of protected material into public view. (Quad One)

Internal Control of Self

The third quadrant is a repository for what you know, including what you know about yourself and about others, and prefer to keep to yourself. This is the perspective of Quadrant 3 when there is a strong internal locus of control (a bias that underlies the original Johari Window). In essence, the disclosure of internally-controlled Quad Three (Q3:I) involves two fundamental issues: (1) what does this other person *want* to know about me and (2) what does this other person *have a right* to know about me.

First, what do other people want to know? Do I tell them about my unsightly rash or my hemorrhoids? Probably only if they are my intimate partner or physician. What about my financial fears or my dread of growing older or dying? Probably only if they are my therapist, financial advisor, coach or pastor. Should I tell this other person that I really have an aversion

to people who are loud or who dominate a conversation?

Probably only when this other person exhibits these traits – but how long do I wait until revealing this Quad Three bias and my Quad Two perceptions of their annoying behavior? This is a difficult process of interpersonal discernment. Distinctions are difficult to draw. Some people are over-disclosing. They share everything about themselves. Let me reveal something about my actual Quad Three. I generate an intense dislike for people who “babble” on about their life. They drive me nuts even when they’re not talking to me, but are inundating some unfortunate stranger on a bus or airplane with all the personal facts about their lives.

There are other people who are very reticent to say much at all about their personal lives or feelings. While I personally prefer these people, I recognize that these under-disclosing people can evoke distrust (intentions) or at least hesitancy in other people with whom they relate. We all need a little information about other people – if for no other reason than to regulate our own relationship with them. Joe Luft describes this regulatory function in his original analysis of the Johari Window:ⁱ

At any moment you can reveal one of these private facts or reactions, make it part of quadrant 1, and have it take its place in the ongoing relationship. You may suspect that such disclosure will stimulate a similar or related disclosure by the other party with whom you are interacting. In the early phases of a relationship with a new acquaintance or with an associate on the job, the Q3-to-Q1 action may be most frequent. Strangers in a new group tend to open the small first quadrant by voluntary shifts of private knowledge into the open.

The second fundamental issue is even more complex and challenging in many interpersonal relationships. What does this other person have the *right* to know about me? Am I required to let them know about my fears, my incompetence, my sexual orientation, or my disabilities? The issue of “outing” is very important in this regard. In recent years, there has been a growing sensitivity concerning the rights to privacy among gays and lesbians. These men and

women should be able to disclose their sexual preferences to other people at a time and in a manner of their own choosing. When other people disclose these preferences (“out” their gay or lesbian colleague), the privacy has been violated and the “outed” person has lost control of his or her third quadrant.

The issue of “outing,” however, goes well beyond the domain of sexual preferences. What if you have a disability that is manifest periodically but is often not apparent (such as epilepsy or migraines)? When and where do you share this information with other people and is it acceptable for some other person to “out” you (tell other people) about your disability? What if you are a fair-skinned African-American who can readily “pass” as an Anglo-American?

When and where do you disclose? Why should you ever have to disclose? Is it ever appropriate for other people to “out” you with regard to your race (or ethnicity)? I could readily point to many other Quad Three domains (for example, political preferences, childhood history, and pervasive fears or hopes) that might or might not be disclosed and that other people might disclose about us (“out us”) without asking our permission.

In some formal settings (such as interviewing prospective employees), there are explicit rules and legal regulations regarding what we are allowed to ask of other people, or about what we can refuse to disclose to other people. Unfortunately, these legal safeguards don’t protect us or provide us with guidance in most settings. This is where the three dimensions of trust come into play. We are more likely to monitor our disclosure and be very careful of our rights (even obligations) to withhold Quad Three information if we do not trust another person’s *intentions* or *competencies*, or if we do not believe that this person shares the same values and *perspectives* on life.

When there is sufficient trust, then two things tend to occur. First, we are more likely to disclose personal matters, because we believe the other person will make appropriate use of and be discrete in sharing this information. Second, we are more likely to feel comfortable in

engaging in meta-level communications. We can talk about our relationship with the other person, identify what we are trying to accomplish in this relationship, and identify appropriate levels and content of Quad Three disclosure for both parties.

External Control of Self

We can add to Luft's list the psychodynamic insights about self that are gained from dreams, slips of the tongue, and our own mistakes. These are sources of wisdom that have been offered by the Freudians, Jungians and other psychoanalytically-oriented observers. Sigmund Freud was among the first to examine the psychodynamics of these seemingly haphazard mistakes. As early as 1901, Freud noted that:ⁱⁱ

The disturbance in speaking which is manifested in a slip of the tongue can in the first place be caused by the influence of another component of the same speech — by an anticipatory sound, that is, or by a perseveration — or by another formulation of the ideas contained within the sentence or . . . text that it is one's intention to utter. . . . The disturbance could, however, be of a second kind . . . it could result from influences *outside* the word, sentence or context, and arise out of elements which are not intended to be uttered and of whose excitation we only learn precisely through the actual disturbance.

For Freud, the key to understanding this leakage of material into Quad Two comes from examining the discrepancy between the intended word or phrase and the actual word or phrase that was spoken. This discrepancy is the "disturbance" and, as Freud suggests, there is rich learning in not only taking seriously the words that are actually spoken, but also examining how these words relate to what the speaker intended.

The Jungians take a further step. They suggest that there is an intrapsychic agent that often is responsible for these slips — the "shadow." They offer wonderful advice about the ways in which the "shadow" — operating as a "trickster" inside each of us — finds a way to "trip us up" (through our gaffs, confusions and flops). The "trickster" trips us up so that our ego doesn't

become too inflated and so that we can be fully exposed to less attractive aspects of our selves (our blind quadrant) that other people, unfortunately, often see quite clearly. I will have more to say about these psychodynamic insights.

Interaction between Two People

Let's return to our ongoing case study regarding Sheila and Kevin. They might begin to meta-communicate by discussing the appropriate nature of their working relationship. They might determine which areas of their lives and which ideas, values and feelings should (and perhaps even must) be shared if they are to do an effective job in helping to lead the institution about which they both care. Given that Kevin has some legitimate concerns about privacy, there is certain material in his Quad Three that Kevin has every right to keep in Quad Three (with regard to his interaction with Sheila).

These boundaries are perfectly clear and appropriate. Other boundaries may be less defensible. What about Kevin's concerns that he might not be doing an adequate job? What about Sheila? Certainly, she should share some of her expectations regarding the work that she wants Kevin to do. On the other hand, Sheila has the right to keep to herself some of her hopes and fears regarding her institution and her role as leader of this institution. She has no obligation to share these thoughts and feelings with Board members. As in the case of Kevin, there are other parameters regarding Quad Three disclosure that are more debatable. What about her past reliance on the financial expertise of other people? Shouldn't Kevin be aware of this past history?

As I mentioned in an earlier essay, these more controversial disclosures by either party require considerable trust (all three kinds) and could increase tension between Sheila and Kevin. The challenge for these two people is to meta-communicate about potential disclosures – without disclosing specific Quad Three content. This is not easy to do and a dilemma is often posed in seeking to engage in this level of disclosure.

Kevin would have to say, “I’m uncomfortable in talking about skills and expertise I might or might not have, yet I know that you need to know what I can do when working with you on the finances of this institution.” Sheila, in turn, would have to say, “I really don’t want to share my own concerns about my financial expertise and about your financial expertise, though I know that you need to know how you can be of greatest help to me and to this institution.”

Ironically, this level of disclosure about what we *don’t* want to disclose often opens the door to greater trust in competence, intentions and perspective and to an increased willingness to discuss some of this problematic Quad Three material. At the very least, this meta-level disclosure reveals the dilemmas that exist in the relationship between Sheila and Kevin (and that exist, for that matter, in most sustained relationships). Being aware of these dilemmas, both parties can be more empathetic and more patient with one another as they seek to establish a viable interpersonal relationship.

Involuntary disclosures are, of course, also being made. This is where external locus of control (Q3:E) enters the picture. Social custom actually prescribes the kinds of things ordinarily exchanged. Resistance to sharing things like the kind of work you do, your place of residence, your reactions to the weather, and general information on why you happen to be at the meeting are noted by others and assumed to be indicative of a desire to be left at a certain psychological distance.

If the group reinforces social custom by jointly concurring on what is shared – for instance, the kind of work each one does – then it would be much more serious to hold back. But the real question in early relationships concerns disclosure over which one has control. To what extent does one share private reactions and feelings – especially about what is going on at the moment? According to Luft, “A qualitative shift in the atmosphere takes place with the sharing of private reactions, tension may mount above the conventional meeting level, and the prospects for significant interactions are increased.”ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱLuft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, p. 45.

ⁱⁱFreud, Sigmund. *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. [translation by Alan Tyson] New York: Norton, [1965], 1901, p.56..

ⁱⁱⁱLuft, Joseph. *Of Human Interaction*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1969, p. 45.