

The New Johari Window

#29: Quadrant Three: The Three Schools of Thought

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As I have already done with regard to quadrants one and two, I turn to the three schools of thought regarding interpersonal relationships to provide diverse perspectives regarding how quadrant three operates. The key features regarding these three perspectives concern the process of disclosure: what are its benefits and drawbacks and how does it become engaged. As I will note, the value assigned to interpersonal disclosure varies from school to school – as does the extent to which candor and disclosure are to be trusted.

The American School

In an earlier essay, I identified some of the benefits and drawbacks of feedback – which is positively valued by the American school. In this chapter I identify benefits and drawbacks associated with disclosure – an interpersonal process that is greatly valued by the American school. There is an American bias toward extraversion (Jung) and toward openness (Schutz). Americans appear to gain energy from their interactions with other people (Jung would describe this as a tendency toward extraversion). Americans also seem to place a high value on candor (being “straight-forward” and “saying what you mean”) and confessional truth-telling about self (you can do just about anything, as long as you acknowledge that you did it and ask for forgiveness).

While in some cases this bias is more in the word than in the deed (especially with regard to openness), there is a general sense that disclosure is inherently valuable. It’s hard to imagine sensitivity training, t-groups and encounter groups coming out of any country other than the United States. Is this bias toward extraversion and openness good or bad? I would suggest there is both the positive and negative side to disclosure and will identify both (much as I did

in Chapter Four with regard to Quad Two feedback). In keeping with the biases of the two schools, I will focus on the positive side of disclosure in this section on the American school, and will turn to the negative side when I present the perspective on Quad Three that is offered by the Continental school.

Articulating Strengths

The American school would propose – especially in its recent emphasis on the appreciative perspective – that we reveal our strengths through movement of Quad Three material to Quad One so that these strengths might be effectively used in a specific interpersonal relationship or group. In Chapter Two I presented the Window of Strength and suggested that many of the strengths of which we are aware are not shared with other people. In seeking to be modest, we don't tell other people what we know or what we can do.

In attempting to avoid accountability and responsibility, we fail to tell other people that we actually could be of some assistance in accomplishing a specific task. When we retain a large Quad Three and do not share its positive aspects, then according to the American school, these positive aspects are less likely to expand and are more likely to atrophy. When these strengths are disclosed and used, they are more likely to further mature and be extended into many different domains. This resides at the heart of the American school's optimism about moving Quad Three material into Quad One.

Personal Learning

There is a second reason, according to the American school, for moving Quad Three material into Quad One. Disclosure allows us to test out reality and (even more importantly) our own personal assumptions about this reality. The person or group to whom we are disclosing can disagree with us or provide evidence to demonstrate that what we have to say is not accurate. They can also agree with us. In a safe and healthy setting (where honest disagreement is acceptable), this agreement can be of great value in helping us arrive at some sense of reality, independent of our own assumptions and social constructions (to which we will turn when

considering the Continental school).

Disclosure serves a second important function with regard to personal learning. The people to whom we disclose have witnessed what we disclose. This is often overlooked as a benefit of disclosure. Mary Belenky and her colleagues write about the tendency of many women to live silently in their world.ⁱ These women retain a very large Quad Three.

They don't feel they have permission to share their own perspectives and their own personal learning with other people. As a result, they not only have no setting in which to test out their personal learning, they also have no one to honor and affirm this learning. When we share ideas in a public manner, these ideas take on more power and we are more likely to act on these ideas. When we remain silent, according to the American school, the ideas are likely to atrophy – much as in the case of Quad Three strengths that we do not share.

Building Interpersonal Trust

The American school offers a third benefit with regard to the movement of Quad Three material into Quad One. Disclosure helps to build all three forms of interpersonal trust. Trust in one's intentions tends to increase because I have been willing (and apparently want to) share information about myself. In many instances, this is because I want to improve or enrich my relationship with the other person (and believe that disclosure will contribute to this process of improvement or enrichment). Trust in competency is also likely to increase with disclosure. I demonstrate that I know how to disclose in an appropriate manner. Finally, disclosure tends to enhance trust with regard to perspective. Both parties in the relationship demonstrate through their mutual disclosure that they value disclosure and Quad One. They are both operating in the "American" spirit.

This latter dynamic becomes particularly important (and often a source of considerable difficulty) when an interpersonal relationship is being established between two people from different cultures. I know that I must be very thoughtful and careful about what I disclose

when working with colleagues from Taiwan. As I have noted previously in this book, the men and women I work with from Taiwan are much more candid than I am about certain matters (such as their personal financial success) and much less candid about other matters (such as their disinterest in an idea or project I am proposing). While the “American” spirit of disclosure is becoming more prevalent throughout the world (as are many other American values and norms of interpersonal relationship), there are still important cultural differences with regard to Quad Three material. The American school is sometimes quite naïve about these cultural differences.

Freedom

Finally, as implied in each of the other three benefits, the American school assumes that disclosure and the movement of Quad Three material into Quad One provides one with greater freedom. Other people are less likely to be surprised by what we choose to do, hence we have more options to consider. It is when we hold many secrets in Quad Three that we have to constantly think and rethink our actions: will this action reveal something about myself that I don’t want other people to know? As advocates of the American school often suggest, it takes considerable energy to manage our lies and secrets. If we always have to remember what we have told one person and not told another person, then we are likely to error on the side of caution – taking very little action or taking action that is widely acceptable in the dominant society (embracing the conforming self).

There is also likely to be more freedom and options with regard to our relationships with those specific people with whom we have been open (moving Quad Three material to Quad One). The other person is more inclined to expand her own Quad One when we are disclosing. Given that we both have a greater amount of information about each other, the American school would suggest that we are likely to expand our own repertoire of interpersonal behaviors when relating to one another. With secrecy comes restriction of behavior. With disclosure comes freedom. These are fundamental assumptions in the American school. These assumptions provide a context for optimism about the potential for improvement in

relationships through interpersonal disclosure. These assumptions, however, also provide a context for considerable concern (voiced by the other two schools) about the authenticity of the disclosure and ways in which disclosure can be manipulated and manipulative. I turn now to these cautionary perspectives.

The British School

The third quadrant has not been as intensively explored by the British school as has Quad Two. Nevertheless, when the British perspective – particularly the systems branch of the British school – is applied to Quad Three, some valuable insights emerge. I will focus specifically on the systemic dynamics associated with the role of “discloser” in an interpersonal relationship or group.

The Discloser

The level of trust in a group is no greater than that of the person who is least open (largest Q3). This general rule comes from the American School. The British School generally accepts this rule, but focuses on the other end of the continuum: the person in the relationship or the person whom the group has chosen to be the “disclosure.” (smallest Q3/largest Q1) This person most readily discloses not only her own personal feelings, concerns and hopes, but often those that are shared by the other person in the relationship or other group members.

In other words, the disclosure is the one who first opens the door. She either opens the door by simply speaking up first or opens the door after being invited to do so by the other person in the relationship or by other members of the group: “Why don’t you go first;” “So, what do you think?” “I bet that you have thought a lot about this issue, so why don’t you let us in on what you’re thinking?” “This seems to be your issue, so why don’t you talk about it first.” If none of these invitations seems to be working, there is always flattery: “You always seem to be the one who is clearest [wisest, most insightful, most candid] about what is going on in this relationship [group], so I [we] would greatly appreciate receiving your clarity [insight, wisdom, honesty].”

The British School suggests that one person may be assigned the role of discloser – often based on stereotypes, socialization or power relationships. Some “types” of people are expected to disclose. Often women are expected to disclose more than men. Certain minorities (for example, Irish or Italians) are supposed to “have more access to their feelings” or to be more “candid” -- hence are assigned the role of discloser. Typically, less powerful participants in a relationship or group are expected to disclose more than more powerful people (unless they are “personalities”, i.e. celebrities or leaders, as I mentioned in Chapter Three).

A closely related question is: what purpose is being served by the “disclosure”? The answer that the British school gives to this question is revealed in part through the selection of the disclosure. As I just noted, this person is usually not a powerful member of the relationship or group. Alternatively, she is someone who is willing to give away a certain type of power (the power to withhold personal information) in exchange for other types of power (leadership, personal charisma, fame and so forth). This suggests, rightfully, that disclosure is often “costly” or at least “risky” in a relationship or group.

Disclosure is risky for several reasons. First, from the British school perspective, initial disclosures typically occur in a “vacuum.” No norms have been established for level or type of disclosure. We see this occurring in many interpersonal and group training programs. The old timers who have been in many other groups of a similar nature typically hang back, waiting for the more naïve newcomers to “break the ice” and offer the first disclosures about the relationship or group: “I really want this relationship to work, because I have had a lot of trouble working with strong women.” “I really feel uncomfortable in this group . . . isn’t someone supposed to be leading us.” “I am so frightened right now . . .” Are these statements appropriate? It takes someone (the disclosure) to test the waters and establish interpersonal or group norms regarding what can and can not be disclosed and discussed.

The second risk concerns the short-term (or perhaps long-term) imbalance in the relationship:

you know a lot about me (the discloser), but I don't know much about you. If I am less powerful than you in the first place, then I am about to become even less powerful. You can more readily predict my behavior, but I still can't predict your behavior. From a British perspective, power comes in part through withholding of information – and, in particular, information about one's own thoughts, feelings and potential actions. Those who are experts on the processes of interpersonal negotiation often stress this point and suggest that we should be very careful in a negotiation about what we do and do not disclose, and about when and where we disclose. The British school (and Continental school) is very sensitive to this power dynamic.

A third risk concerns ways in which the disclosed information is accepted, interpreted and used by other people. Given the power of self-fulfilling prophecies (to which I devote much more attention in Chapter Seven), it is not unthinkable that the preliminary disclosures of someone in a relationship or group – disclosures that don't have a precedence or even much of a context – will be interpreted in a manner that reconfirms stereotypes or specific assumptions about the "personality" or predispositions of the discloser. Let me offer two brief case studies that illustrate this self-fulfilling prophecy, as well as other risks and dynamics associated with the role of "discloser."

Case Studies of Disclosers

A male of Italian origins, whom I will call "Peter," is selected as the discloser in a relationship. The dynamics of this disclosure reinforces the stereotype of the "emotional" Italian with regard to anything that he says. Even to say that "I am not particularly emotional at this moment" would be interpreted as a defensive reaction by Peter against and denial of a "deeply emotional response." A statement by a female first discloser in a relationship or group, whom I will call "Ellen," indicating that she is concerned about being placed in the traditional female role in the group (as secretary, refreshment coordinator, etc.) would be interpreted as "further evidence" that Ellen (or perhaps all women in the group) are "overly sensitive," vulnerable," or "uptight and angry."

The response of Peter and Ellen to the reactions of other people regarding their disclosure would reinforce the stereotype or personal assumption. If another person essentially denies Peter's declaration that he doesn't feel particularly emotion, then Peter is likely to get more emotional – frustrated and even angry because his declaration is not being accepted. The prophecy is self-fulfilled: "See, Peter does get easily upset and is emotional, just like every other Italian man." Similarly, the group would probably take the traditional feminine role away from Ellen and assign it to another person – often a person whom the group has assigned the role of "friendly [and non-protesting] helper" or even "martyr."

Ellen would be viewed as a "troublemaker" and, in her own withdrawal (as she tries to figure out what to do next with this group), Ellen is likely to be seen as "sullen," or "hurt." This could easily lead other members of the group to reinforce their stereotype that Ellen is (or perhaps all women in their group) is/are "too sensitive" or "vulnerable" – hence must be handled with "kid gloves." This is likely to make Ellen even more frustrated and perhaps angry. We now have reinforcement for the assumption that Ellen is (and perhaps all women in the group are) "uptight and angry." The self-fulfillment loop is closed once again with regard to both Peter and Ellen. No new learning has occurred in either the relationship with Peter or the group's relationship with Ellen.

There is no way in which either Peter or Ellen can get out of this "rule suction" without the assistance of someone else. Any further comments that either Peter or Ellen might make will only reinforce the stereotype or assumptions held (in Quad Two) by others in the relationship or group about the reasons for and "true meaning" of these disclosures. If either Peter or Ellen were allowed to speak up and disclose these concerns at a later point – especially after Peter and Ellen had already offered a variety of other verbal comments (not about themselves) and had displayed a wide range of behaviors – the stereotyping and self-fulfilling assumptions would be less likely to be sustained. The big risk, therefore, for the first discloser in a relationship or group concerns establishing an interpersonal "rut" in which the discloser's

personality and behavior is placed, never to be re-established in a more accurate and liberating framework.

The Continental School

The third quadrant is “owned” by the Continental school, just as Quad One is “owned” by the American school and Quad Two is “owned” by the British school. The social-critical analysis of the Continental school has much to say about this quadrant and, specifically, about the complex dynamics of interpersonal disclosure.

The Continental School focuses in particular on two fundamental issues. The first issue concerns conformity to existing social constructions. Does this specific disclosure reinforce social constructs or does it, in some way, change them? Does a specific disclosure conform to the narrative that is dominant in a specific social setting (or to the grand narrative that is dominant in most societies at a particular point in history)?

If it conforms to existing social constructions and dominant narratives, then is this disclosure in some sense self-fulfilling (as I illustrated above with regard to the British school)? Does it tend to reinforce stereotypes and untested assumptions that reside within the social construction or dominant narrative? If it does not conform to the existing social constructions or to the dominant narrative, then can this disclosure even be understood and assimilated by other people?

The second issue concerns the context within which the disclosure occurs and the nature of the people receiving the disclosure. While the British school focuses on the role played by the discloser, the Continental school often looks to the recipient of the disclosure to gain insight about the dynamics of Quad Three. Those in the Continental school are likely to ask: Who can disclose in this setting? It might not just be the powerless people (as the British school is likely to conclude).

In many traditional (premodern) societies, intimate conversations (movement of Quad Three material to Quad One) readily occur in front of a slave or servant. The latter person is not even considered a part of the social system in which the disclosure takes place. Thus, in a paradoxical manner, the discloser may actually be reinforcing his power by being open “in front of” (but with minimal acknowledgement of) the powerless person.

Those aligned with the Continental school also want to know where the disclosure takes place. Does it occur in the bedroom, in the bathroom, or in the Board room? As I mentioned previously, Richard Sennett suggests in European society that the location of disclosure has shifted during the past three centuries from public to private (home) setting. In many premodern societies, a special room (parlor or drawing room) has been set aside for disclosure. There were also men’s clubs or spas (and, in some communities, women’s clubs or spas) where certain kinds of disclosure took place. A similar role was played during modern times by the “den” or “rec room” and, in public, by restrictive social clubs (Elks, Moose, Masons, Knights of Columbus, and so forth).

What about in postmodern societies? Is the virtual chat room the new setting for disclosure? Are we likely to find disclosure more often (and successfully) promoted in the life-style enclaves that I described in Chapter Two? Are men and women most open with one another when they are talking about their antique cars (and their personal lives) at a weekend auto show or about their children (and themselves) at the Saturday soccer game? The Continental school encourages us to focus on these settings. It asks us what the settings tell us about the nature of the disclosure that occurs and about the nature of the social constructions and narratives that attend these disclosures and specific settings.

Filling the Gap

The Continental school moves beyond just the identification of narratives and settings in assessing the dynamics of Quad Three. Advocates of a Continental perspective would ask us why we need to disclose. Are the benefits articulated by the American school really worth the

risks identified by the British school? Perhaps there are even deeper concerns being addressed through disclosure. As in the case of the other quadrants, the Continental school tends to dig deeper into our personal and collective psyche to find out about the peculiar dynamics of interpersonal relationships.

Perhaps we need disclosure to “fill us up” in our 21st Century, postmodern society. In a world in which we are saturated with many different senses of self, perhaps we need to hear our own narrative to be reassured that we do have a self (about which we can prepare a narrative). We fill ourselves up with our own narrative. We saturate ourselves with our own stories and use these self-generated stories (internal locus of control) to counteract the stories that inundate us from outside our self (external locus of control). Furthermore, we have recipients of (and witnesses to) our disclosures. These people can reinforce our self-generated stories about self and give these stories external verification and credence.

It is certainly defensible to conclude that our identity (the nature of our true self) is defined primarily by our relationships with other people. Thus, by disclosing about myself to another person, I am able to define myself and fill myself up in a manner that seems more tangible than the hypothetical and externally-imposed senses of self that “saturate” me in my postmodern world. This desire to be filled up through confirming relationships with other people is a major theme in the social critiques offered by many mid-20th Century representatives of the Continental school.

For instance, in *The Lonely Society*, David Reisman describes an “outer-directed” American society in which people seek confirmation of self from other people. Christopher Lasch similarly writes about *The Culture of Narcissism* and our obsession with gaining a true sense of self, primarily through the attention (and resulting affirmation) that other people provide by listening to our narcissistic disclosure. The most profound (and disturbing) of these critical analyses may have been offered by Arthur Miller, a playwright and keen observer of American culture, who constructs the great American tragedy (*Death of a Salesman*). He

portrays a man (Willy Loman) who believes it is essential for one to be affirmed (“well-liked”) by other people and fails to construct his own personal sense of self – a sense of self that would enable him to endure the loss of job and social status.

Isolation and Polarization

The Continental school offers another perspective with regard to reasons why we might move material from Quad Three to Quad One. This perspective is social psychological in nature. In essence, I disclose information about myself and, in particular, my self-narrative in order to reconfirm my existing social construction. I only reveal that which will be confirmed with regard to my beliefs and values. I will only reveal to people who will support my beliefs and self-image.

Bellah would suggest that this is one of the attractions of a sheltered life style enclave: I only have to relate to people who think and feel like I do and who will confirm the veracity of all my disclosures. Roger Brown describes a similar phenomenon in describing the benefit to be derived from being a fan (fanatic) of a specific sports team, movie star or (in Brown’s own case) opera singer: ⁱⁱ

The test of being a fan is very simple. Your own self-esteem must rise and fall with the successes and failures of your object of admiration. In addition, though you may be a solitary fan with no nearby like-minded group, a fan cannot rest content with his private opinion but must try to convince others that his evaluation is objectively correct. That means he must make propaganda to build a social consensus that will establish the reality he believes in.

In essence, we either surround ourselves with other people like ourselves who will like (and not challenge) what we share about ourselves, or we will seek to bring other people around to our point of view – so that we can avoid differing constructs and perspectives. We observe this dynamic not only in the lure of life style enclaves, but also in the isolation and polarization of both political and religious groups in many 21st Century societies.

Implications and Applications: What to Do with Q3

As we draw together the various perspectives on Quad Three, several fundamental conclusions emerge with regard to the importance of Quad Three and ways in which to move Quad Three material into Quad One. I will focus on three of these fundamental conclusions: (1) the value of safe settings in which to “try out” disclosures, (2) the learning inherent in selecting what to disclose and (3) the unpredictability inherent in disclosure.

Safe Settings: “Try it out!”

First, it seems that safe settings are needed for constructive disclosure to occur. The American school has taught us this. The British school has taught us that we must be careful in selecting this safe setting – we must be sure that we are not getting caught in a collusion whereby we become the designated discloser in a relationship or group setting. Given this emphasis on safety, it is also clear (as identified by the American school) that disclosure can yield many benefits. Therefore, it is important to give disclosure a try.

We should try out the role of discloser-- see how it feels and fits. We should float “trial balloons” - finding times and places where we can say to someone we trust: “What do you think would happen in setting X if I were to reveal Y?” Our colleague can not only be a witness to this disclosure, but also let us know whether or not this disclosure seems appropriate in setting X. By witnessing the disclosure (even though it may ultimately be intended for a different person or group), our colleague provides the setting for a “dress rehearsal.”

Once we have disclosed something (even to a friend), it carries less power. It is no longer as “big a deal.” We have said it and the world has not fallen down around us. Our colleague has received what we said and is now ready to strategize with us about when and where to make this disclosure to the person or group in question, and about how to articulate this disclosure. If there is not a friend available for this pilot test, then one should obtain the services of a

performance coach – someone who can provide the safe setting in which to try out the role of discloser and, more specifically, help set up the conditions for the preparation and rehearsal of a specific disclosure script.

Learning: On the Edge of Disclosure

Important personal learning takes place not just in the reactions of other people to our disclosure, but also on the edge of the disclosures themselves – particularly, the disclosures over which we have control (Q3-Internal). We learn from the questions we ask about Quad Three and from our answers to these questions: What do I tell the other person? Why do I share with them this information about myself? Am I trying to improve my relationship with this person or am I providing this disclosure primarily for my own personal learning? Am I trying to “manage” my public image or is this disclosure about authentic and aligned aspects of myself (Q1)? Am I trying to elicit feedback from them (Q2) in order to either confirm or modify my self-image? Am I hoping that this disclosure will somehow help me access unknown aspects of myself (Q4) – as in the processes of psychoanalysis (free association on a couch)?

As these questions and the answers to these questions suggest, rich learning can be derived from deliberating about the time, place and reason for disclosure. New insights about our self are available on the edge of disclosure. Perhaps this is the greatest benefit inherent in the process of deciding whether or not to move material from Quad Three to Quad One. These insights are likely to be even greater if we can talk with someone about our process of decision-making with regard to disclosure.

Once again, this person can be a good friend or a skilled coach. This person becomes a witness to our reflective deliberations regarding the disclosure. She can gently probe us regarding the “real” answers to these questions, and can offer her own suggestions regarding what the answers to our questions might be (especially after witnessing our dress rehearsal of the disclosure).

Unpredictability: The Process of Unanticipated Discovery and Insight

This third implication provides a cautionary note to balance off the encouragement to disclose that is inherent in the first and second implications. The third implication is based on the concerns often voiced by the British school regarding indiscriminate disclosure. As I have repeatedly noted, when we disclose, there is a witness (or multiple witnesses) to this disclosure. I have also noted that something becomes more of a reality when it is witnessed. We must be careful about disclosure, therefore, for we may be dipping into a repository of unacknowledged or unprocessed information about ourselves (from Quad Four).

We are entering into new territory once our disclosure is witnessed and once there is a reaction to this disclosure. As long as I keep my “secrets” to myself, I can speculate all I want about how other people will receive this disclosure. Yet, when I actually observe the reactions I am likely to discover something unanticipated about myself. For example, I might find that I am more defensive than I had previously anticipated when recipients of my disclosure indicate that they are surprised about the information that I have disclosed. Why am I defensive? Did I think that these other people already knew this about me? Am I participating in my own self-fulfilling prophecy (“See, I knew that she would react badly to this disclosure.”)

Alternatively, I might be surprised that the recipients of my disclosure already know this about me. Have I been leaking my Quad Three material to such an extent that it already resides in other people’s Quad Two about me? Why haven’t these other people shared this Quad Two material with me? Why does it take my own disclosure (Quad Three) for other people to give me feedback (from their Quad Two)?

Does my disclosure and my colleagues’ subsequent feedback (“I already know this about you”) change our relationship – not so much because my colleagues now know something new about me, but instead because we can now talk about something that we have all already known for some period of time? This material has resided in my own Quad Three and in the

other people's Quad Two for an unknown period of time. For how long has it been in my third quadrant? And how long has it been in their second quadrant? It can now reside in our shared Quad One. Is the real issue in our relationship one of trusting one another to own up to both our Quad Two and Quad Three material?

In essence, I am identifying an interpersonal dynamic that Luft hypothesized in his original Johari Window. He suggested that when we disclose something, there is likely to be new material from Quad Four that replaces the former Quad Three material. Given that I have repeatedly emphasized in this book that we need to honor the wisdom of our own personal defenses, it is important for us to be cognizant of our confusion and fear about disclosure. We must wait for the right time and place to offer material to another person from our third quadrant.

This disclosure can often yield much greater personal insight than we could have anticipated. Both feedback from another person's second quadrant and disclosure of material from our own third quadrant can yield quite surprising insights for us regarding our self and our relationships with other people –even if we are in control of this disclosure (Quad Three: I) and dictate conditions for receiving the feedback. In each case we are touching upon the powerful dynamics of Quad Four (to which I now turn) – and these dynamics are never predictable and are always somewhat (if not profoundly) disturbing.

ⁱ Belenky, Mary and others. *Women's Ways of Knowing*. New York: Basic Books, 1986.

ⁱⁱ Brown, Roger. *Social Psychology*. (2nd Edition). New York: Free Press, 1986, p. 555.