INFLUENCE

The Value of Tactical Disclosure in Influence:

When and How to Open Up

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Choosing to share something that makes you a little vulnerable can build trust, signal flexibility, and create a climate for mutual influence.

Every day we make decisions about whether to share information or to hold it close. We often have a circle of friends, family, colleagues with whom we normally share personal information – how we are feeling, what we are thinking about, what we are experiencing. A wider circle is privy to our ideas, beliefs, and opinions. The boundary can move – for example, as acquaintances become friends, as neighbors move away, as colleagues change jobs or roles, as children grow up. We have a set of assumptions about how to manage our personal data. We distinguish among information that is public (available to anyone), personal (available to people in my immediate circles), and private (only available to intimates with whom I choose to share it.) There are times, however, when these boundaries can and should move. For example, under difficult circumstances, I may share personal information only with those who are in the center of my closest circle. If I want a relationship to move from collegial or acquaintance to friendship, I may extend my openness beyond where it has been. And there are circumstances where I may make a tactical decision to disclose information that I would otherwise have kept private.

Under what circumstances might it be wise to flex that boundary between public and personal or personal and private?

- When you want to build trust with another
- When you want to indicate flexibility – for example, in a negotiation
- When open communication is essential – for example, on a difficult team project
- When you need to recover from a mistake or failure
- When you want to create a climate for mutual influence.

In building trust, disclosure is usually reciprocal and the response is likely at a similar level. To increase the level, you can open up further yourself or ask a question that prompts the other to greater disclosure – which you would then reciprocate. To indicate flexibility, you can use language like, “something in the neighborhood of…”, “something of equal value to…”, or similar suggestions. To create greater openness on a team, you might agree on a set of communication

norms. Recovering from an error or mistake is easiest when you acknowledge the situation clearly in a timely way and accept responsibility for it.

Using disclosure as an influence tactic requires thought. You will want to have a clear influence objective in mind and believe that by opening up and thus making yourself somewhat vulnerable, you are creating an opportunity for a deeper, more trusting influence relationship. You want that relationship to be based on honesty so that the information shared is accurate, believable, and requires a similar level of vulnerability, building ongoing trust between or among participants in the conversation. The outcomes should include:

- A common understanding of the situation and shared responsibility for changes or improvements
- A focus on solutions, not on blame
- The ability to correct mistakes and learn from failures
- Increased mutual trust.

Some influential ways to express disclosure could include:

> **WAYS TO EXPRESS DISCLOSURE**
>
> - "I need to let you know about a problem I uncovered…"
> - "I realize that I was wrong about…"
> - "My previous assessment was off by…"
> - "My mistake was…"
> - "I believe you were right about…"

I once heard someone say that the only time they heard someone admit that they were wrong was on sports chat programs. "You know, you might be right…"

Trying to hide the truth or evade responsibility generally backfires. The ability to acknowledge issues and errors generally leads to more timely problem-solving and greater mutual respect. You are far more likely to influence someone to help you, work with you, provide resources for you, or anything else, when they experience you as open and honest and non-defensive.

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Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

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