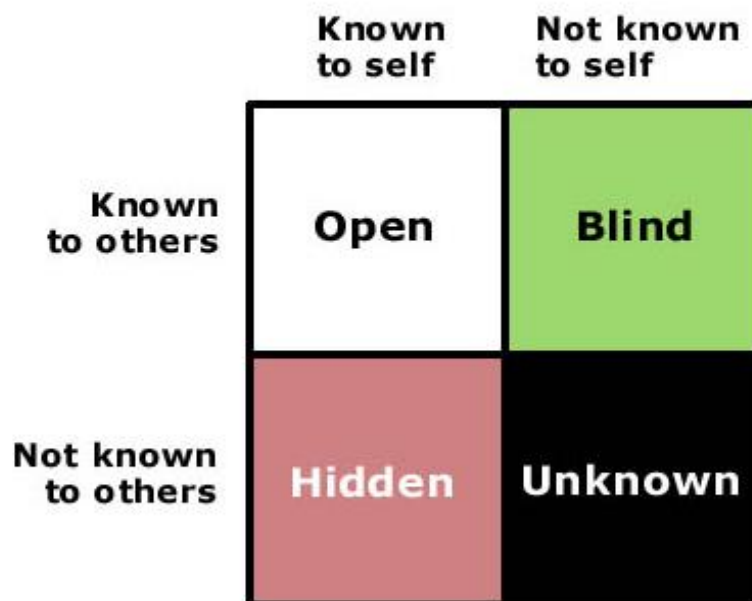


Openness the Key to Constructive Feedback

How to Learn from Your Own Experience

What is it to be an open person? The Johari Window provides a graphic way of looking at interpersonal openness.

The Johari Window



The window represents the whole person.

The **Open area** represents that part of you – your behavior, feelings and thoughts – which you share freely with others. When you form a new relationship this area tends to be small. What you share with the new acquaintance is governed largely by social convention and limited to things that are public knowledge anyway. As you get to know and trust another, you are both willing to share more of yourselves and the open areas grow in size.

The **Blind area** represents behavior you are not aware of, although another may be. “Would the gift that God would give us, to see ourselves as others see us.” You find out about your blind spot through feedback from others.

The **Hidden area** includes thoughts and feelings that you have not yet revealed to others through your behavior. You share your hidden by self-disclosure.

The **Unknown area** is that part of you which you once knew but have forgotten, or which you have not yet discovered. What helps you to probe into your unknown is to experiment and play. Small children are experts at self-discovery, simply because they are experts at play. As people grow older, they often tend to use their capacity to play, to test, to experiment, to fool around as children do.

Enlarging your area of openness by reducing the hidden and the unknown is always a little risky. There is perceived risk to you and risk to others. Will you hurt them? Will you make them angry? Will they reject you? What will they think of you? What will you find out about yourself? The risk, the pain and the fear of being open can be strong deterrents. When is openness worth it? When is it possible? When is it constructive?

Attention to the following points increases the probability that openness will improve a relationship rather than harm it.

1. There must be good reason for being open. Openness must have a purpose beyond itself. You are open because you care enough about improving a relationship to make it worth the effort. If a certain measure of caring does not come across in your attempts to be open, you may well be perceived as meddling, manipulative, threatening, aggressive or even hostile.
2. Openness is not an absolute value. It is not always possible or even desirable. It must be put into a context of sensitive responsiveness to the other. It must not only meet your needs, but the needs of others.
3. Openness involves risk taking. There is always the possibility of rejection, anger, new and frightening knowledge, being hurt. The risk is on both sides. It is important to remember that when you risk and initiate openness, the other person may be running an even bigger risk by being open in return. People have many safer options: to evade, to flee, to be defensive, to attack, to be silent. When you offer your openness people can back off. When they accept your openness you are both committed.
4. Realize that openness is sharing and that it is a contradiction to thrust openness on to another. The other has to be willing to be open with you. . Otherwise openness becomes coercive.
5. Defenses are not all bad. We need them from time to time. Being open should never be an excuse to strip another of their defenses. Openness should build trust to the point where another feels safe enough to be able to drop their defenses of their own accord.
6. Openness means facing and accepting yourself. It means owning your thoughts, feelings, and behavior and being responsible for them and responsible for changing them or not.
7. Openness means accepting the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of others as fact and letting them be responsible for changing them, and also responsible for changing them or not.

8. The aim of openness is not to change the other, but to share an understanding of your relationship. It helps you to know how you perceive each other's intentions and behavior, and how you feel about each other's actions. This awareness of each other should open up new behavioral alternatives. The change that grows out of openness should be self-determined.
9. Being open is not the same as being "personal." Revealing a lot of personal details about your past can be a defensive substitute for dealing with the here and now behavior, thoughts and feelings.
10. There are a number of simple communication skills that are useful in trying to be open. These skills can be acquired by attention and practice. It is usually more helpful if you...
 - separate behavior from feelings
 - i. Less helpful: "You jerk" (an accusation)
 - ii. More helpful: "What you said (your behavior) made me very angry (my feeling reaction)."
 - are more descriptive of behavior rather than evaluative or judgmental of the person
 - are specific rather than general
 - separate thoughts from feelings
 - i. "I think this is a good idea but I feel very threatened by it."
 - let the other draw their own conclusion
 - state the other person's idea in your own words to check out if you have properly understood. This is called paraphrasing.
 - are provisional rather than absolute,
11. Giving and getting feedback plays a key role in being open. Feedback is a way of seeing the impact on another of what you say and do. Feedback on your behavior, on how you come across, can help you consider some alternative ways of behaving. If it is not given constructively, it can encourage defensiveness, or simply be destructive. Feedback is constructive...
 - it is asked for rather than imposed
 - is well timed. Feedback is most often useful when it is given immediately after the behavior in question. Sometimes it is better to wait, especially if the recipient is angry, confused, upset, or defensive, and not inclined to listen.
 - it is not saved up and dumped all at once. This is usually accompanied by a build-up of feelings which is hard to sort out from the message.
 - it is checked to insure accurate, clear communication
 - it is checked to validate against the perceptions of others
 - it is intended to be helpful to the recipient. It meets the recipient's needs, rather than the needs of the one giving the feedback
 - it leaves the recipient free to do with it what they want, to change or not as they choose
 - it is specific rather than general. Examples of exact statements and behavior are most useful.

- it simply describes the recipient's behavior and its impact on others, without making any judgments about them as a person.
- it is given in a climate of trust, with feelings of caring and support
- it focuses on things the recipient can do something about.
- negative feedback is preceded by positive feedback. This helps give support.
- It is received non-defensively. A good rule of thumb is to ask only clarifying questions when receiving feedback.
- The recipient has a chance to say what they think and feel about the feedback when it is all over. This can lead to a better understanding the recipient behaves the way they do.