



# When sharing hurts: How and why self-disclosing weakness undermines the task-oriented relationships of higher status disclosers<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

It is generally believed that self-disclosure has positive effects, particularly for relationships; however, we predict and find negative effects in the context of task-oriented relationships. Across three laboratory experiments, we find that both task-relevant (Study 1) and task-irrelevant (Studies 2 and 3) weakness disclosures, made by a higher (versus peer) status coworker during an interdependent task, negatively affected the receiver's perception of the discloser's status and consequently undermined the discloser's influence, encouraged task conflict, and led to lower relationship quality with the discloser. Peer status disclosers did not trigger these negative responses. We find support for perceived vulnerability as the proposed psychological process (Study 3). Specifically, higher (but not peer) status disclosers experience a status penalty after weakness disclosures because these disclosures signal vulnerability, which violates the expectations people have for higher (but not peer) status coworkers. These findings provide insight into the effects of self-disclosing weakness at work and the ways in which high status employees may inadvertently trigger their own status loss.

## 1. Introduction

Self-disclosure is becoming an increasingly relevant phenomenon in the workplace. As the line between work and personal life blurs (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000) and coworkers communicate more with each other using social media, the possibility for self-disclosure of meaningful personal information among coworkers increases (Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg, 2013). Compounding this is a generational shift in disclosure such that younger workers view it as more appropriate and acceptable to discuss personal matters with coworkers (Klaus, 2012). Indeed, a recent survey conducted by LinkedIn and CensusWide asked 11,500 full-time professionals around the world about their views on relationships at work, and found that 67% of millennials are willing to share once-taboo personal details including salary, relationships, and family issues with their coworkers (Fisher, 2014).

Findings from the self-disclosure literature suggest that this increase in self-disclosure may have some positive consequences for people's work relationships. Indeed, recent theorizing highlights that self-disclosure can be a key determinant of high quality relationships at work

(Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Phillips, Rothbard, & Dumas, 2009). This is because decades of research on self-disclosure suggest that the act of making oneself vulnerable by sharing personal information about the self typically promotes liking and feelings of closeness (Collins & Miller, 1994; Cozby, 1972; Jourard, 1959; Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969). In the organizational context, this is important because the quality of coworker relationships has consequences for organizational outcomes such as team performance (Harrison, Price, Gavin, & Florey, 2002; Jehn & Shah, 1997), organizational citizenship behaviors (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000), and turnover (Iverson & Roy, 1994).

However, the vast majority of empirical research on self-disclosure has been conducted outside the work domain, and self-disclosure at work creates specific challenges not present in non-work relationships. Although self-disclosure has been found to increase relationship quality in friendships or intimate relationships (Collins & Miller, 1994), self-disclosure can also change the nature of relationships (Phillips et al., 2009), which may not always be beneficial in the work environment. For example, in task-oriented relationships, individuals benefit from and may actually desire hierarchical differentiation (Tiedens,

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Unzueta, & Young, 2007), because it facilitates coordination (de Kwaadsteniet & van Dijk, 2010), and it is possible for self-disclosure to disrupt these status-differentiated relationships (Phillips et al., 2009). Therefore, it is important to understand how self-disclosures that have the potential to alter status dynamics shape the effectiveness and quality of relationships at work.

In this article we address this question by examining how and why a higher status versus peer status coworker self-disclosing weakness (i.e., sharing meaningful personal information that makes salient a potential shortcoming) affects both the effectiveness and the quality of the relationship in task-oriented partnerships. We draw on theories of self-disclosure (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Kelly & McKillop, 1996) and expectation states (Berger, Conner, & Fisek, 1974; Ridgeway & Berger, 1986) to suggest that because self-disclosing a weakness signals vulnerability, it will prompt different reactions from the recipient depending on the discloser's status. We present three laboratory studies showing that when higher status coworkers self-disclose weakness it diminishes the receiver's perception of the discloser's status, which ultimately undermines both the discloser's effectiveness in influencing the recipient without conflict and the quality of the discloser's relationship with the recipient in task-oriented relationships. However, when peer status coworkers self-disclose weakness, influence, conflict, and relationship quality are unaffected because their perceived status remains the same.

By examining the consequences of self-disclosure in task-oriented coworker relationships, we aim to contribute to organizational research in several ways. First, while the majority of empirical research on self-disclosure has been conducted outside the domain of workplace relationships, our research builds on recent theorizing (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2009) and empirically examines the consequences of self-disclosing weakness in task-oriented work relationships. Because disclosing potentially negative information about the self is becoming more commonplace in workplace relationships, understanding how the context of workplace relationships may impact the effects of self-disclosure represents an important gap in the research for scholars and practitioners alike. Second, we diverge from recent research that has focused on self-disclosure from the discloser's perspective (e.g., the decision to disclose, the discloser's perception of their relationships; Dumas, Phillips, & Rothbard, 2013; Phillips et al., 2009; Ragins, 2008), and instead use a controlled laboratory setting to examine how the individual who receives the disclosure ("the receiver") reacts to the discloser's decision to share. This contributes to organizational research because it highlights how the behavior (i.e., self-disclosing weakness) has immediate consequences for the receiver, which ultimately impacts the workplace relationship and the organization in which the relationship is embedded. Third, we challenge the entrenched assumption currently held in the literature that self-disclosure will necessarily foster liking in relationships by presenting one type of workplace relationship (task-oriented partnerships) where self-disclosures that attenuate the status of the discloser may harm rather than help relationship quality. Finally, building on the nascent literature on status loss (Marr & Thau, 2014; Neeley, 2013), our research highlights one way that high status individuals might trigger their own status loss at work (i.e., through self-disclosing weakness).

### 1.1. Why self-disclose weakness?

Our focus in this article is on the consequences of *self-disclosing weakness*, which we define as sharing meaningful personal information with a coworker that makes salient a potential shortcoming. By potential shortcoming, we refer to personal information that, in a particular organizational context, could be construed as a shortcoming, or could lead to attributions or assumptions about the discloser being flawed in some way. As such, the content of the disclosure may be negative (e.g., "I didn't do well on my last performance review"), but the content could also be neutral (or positive), and yet it has the

potential to trigger weakness attributions or assumptions about the discloser. For example, if a woman discloses to her coworker that she is pregnant, this disclosure could lead to attributions of weakness such that the woman may be less committed or available to work, even though the content of the disclosure itself is not negative.

If a self-disclosure has the potential to be construed as a weakness or lead to attributions or assumptions of deficiency about the discloser, one may question why some people would willingly reveal that information about themselves. The discloser may not realize that the disclosure will be perceived as a weakness, or the discloser might inadvertently self-disclose to a coworker by sharing information in non-work spaces (e.g., over social media) where a coworker is in the "invisible audience" (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013). However, many individuals will intentionally self-disclose weakness to coworkers because they *want* to share it. They may share it strategically because they believe it will help them affiliate with or indirectly influence the receiver (Dingler-Duhon & Brown, 1987) by eliciting sympathy or concern (Sinaceur, Kopelman, Vasiljevic, & Haag, 2015). They may also self-disclose weakness because they want their coworkers to know them 'as they really are' (cf. self-verification theory Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992).

Self-disclosing weakness may also have a variety of positively anticipated benefits for the discloser. Presenting a 'better' or more positive version of oneself to one's coworkers can be emotionally exhausting (Grandey, 2003). When individuals self-disclose weakness to a coworker, they liberate the cognitive resources they would otherwise expend trying to conceal that information, and are likely to experience a sense of relief and renewed energy (Ragins, 2008). This can translate into greater job satisfaction (Griffith & Hebl, 2002) and even job performance (Cable & Kay, 2012). For example, in a field study of self-verification in the organizational entry process, Cable and Kay (2012) found that individuals who were high self-verifiers (i.e., individuals who are more likely to disclose personal information about themselves, even if it is negative) were evaluated by their supervisors nine months later as better performers in terms of both role performance and citizenship behaviors. Therefore, to the extent that an employee might anticipate these benefits, this could motivate workers to pre-emptively self-disclose weakness to a coworker.

Despite the potential benefits for disclosers, however, it is important to understand how receivers are affected by and react to self-disclosing weakness, as this will have implications for the discloser and his/her working relationship with the receiver. Few empirical studies have examined specifically how receivers react to weakness self-disclosures, and the studies examining related phenomenon present mixed findings. For example, one study showed that people who are willing to express more negative emotions have more intimate relationships than people who are less willing to do so (Graham, Huang, Clark, & Helgeson, 2008), perhaps suggesting that weakness self-disclosures would trigger feelings of closeness or liking in the receiver. Conversely, however, a recent study of disclosures on Facebook highlighted that individuals with low self-esteem are liked less for their online posts (i.e., disclosures) because these disclosures are perceived to be negative (Forest & Wood, 2012). Moreover, these studies focused on the interpersonal (e.g., liking) consequences of self-disclosure, and to our knowledge, no empirical studies have examined the task-related (e.g., task influence, task conflict) consequences of self-disclosing weakness.

Therefore, in the section below, we draw on theories of expectation states and status distance to make predictions about why the status of the discloser will critically affect how self-disclosing weakness to a coworker in a task-oriented relationship affects that relationship in terms of both the effectiveness of the working relationship (e.g., influence, conflict) and the quality of the relationship (e.g., liking, desire for future contact).

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