

Coaching and Multi-Source Feedback

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Though it is plagued with many problems, multi-source 360° Feedback processes for appraising the performance of employees are currently receiving extensive attention in corporate life. By the turn of the century, more than one quarter of the business organizations in the United States reported using a multi-source feedback process. The percentage has undoubtedly grown much larger over the past decade. This enthusiasm is accompanied by an equally impressive controversy concerning the appropriate use and potential costs and benefits associated with this process.

Expanding the Perspective

Multi-source assessment is about expanding the perspective of an employee regarding her own performance. It is also about broadening the base of an assessment and hopefully improving the validity of data gathered about an employee's performance. This performance appraisal process begins with the self-assessment by the employee, along with the assessment by this employee's supervisor. This is *45-Degree feedback*. Then the expansion begins. The most common types of expansion are up, down and sideways in the organization. The assessment by a colleague (sideways) yields *90-Degree feedback*, while additional upward assessment by subordinates produces *180-Degree feedback*.

At a more ambitious level, the scope of this assessment might be expanded to include other people both inside and outside the organization. These are the so-called *360-Degree feedback* processes. 360° feedback programs may include other employees in the organization who have been impacted by the employee's performance. These are often identified as internal customers of the employee who is being assessed. A 360° feedback assessment might also include people outside the organization who are directly served by the employee or who benefit indirectly from his work. These are the external customers.

Frequently, customers are brought in not only to provide feedback but also help design the process. Typically customers in the 360° feedback process complete a rating scale that parallels the scale being filled out by employees. Customers might also be interviewed regarding the employee's performance or several customer focus groups might be convened to generate data about the employee's performance. In some instances, members of the organization serve as surrogate customers and provide an assessment of their own experiences of being served by the employee who is being assessed.

The true 360° feedback process involves all of these sources—though in a few cases, a multi-source assessment may be even more extensive, involving the solicitation of appraisals from members of the employee's family, friends or former employers. This extensive review is typically oriented toward employee development, rather than being used for personnel decisions. It is usually only available to the highest-level employees in an organization and is rarely mandatory. In yet other cases, the 360° feedback process is conducted with a team rather than an individual employee. Data are gathered not only from the team members themselves, but also from customers, independent observers and raters, other teams in the organization, and the supervisor to whom the team reports. In some instances an entire organization has conducted a 360° feedback process regarding its own operations.

The typical 360° feedback process involves construction or purchase of a formal rating scale, though many of those experienced in the field have advocated the use of individual interviews to compliment quantitative assessments. While interviews offer substantial benefits, most multi-source assessments currently rely exclusively on rating scales. Furthermore, the items on this scale are usually normative in character. A minority opinion (with which I agree) suggests that normative items might be interspersed with items that describe the employee's style or pattern of behavior. When only normative items are used, the multi-source feedback system is likely to be threatening for many employees—especially if it is mandatory and deficit-based.

The Three Assessment Tiers

360° feedback usually involves two tiers in an assessment process. With regard to the first tier (self-assessment), the employee rates his own performance using the scale that is being distributed to the other people involved in the feedback assessment. The employee can also be asked to predict how he thinks the other people completing the scale will rate him. While this prediction process is rarely

engaged I find that it can yield great insights. In most cases, when engaging the second tier (assessment by others), the employee helps to select the people who will rate him, though the final list remains confidential to preserve anonymity. Typically, seven or eight colleagues are asked to complete the rating scale, though this number may be as great as twenty-five or as little as four or five.

The third tier is rarely addressed in a 360° feedback process. This third tier concerns assessment of the context or culture in which the employee operates and in which the ratings are being solicited. This third tier certainly has an impact on the employee's performance and the perceptions of employees regarding one another. While many 360° advocates suggest that multi-source feedback can influence organizational culture, most fail to recognize that influence can also flow in the opposite direction: organizational culture can influence the ratings being given to individual employees engaged in a 360° feedback process.

The role taken by organizational culture in the lives and performance of contemporary employees is actually growing even larger, given the current shift in job structures and responsibilities. Tier Two assessments help to address the challenges associated with these multiple roles and assignments. However, Tier Three assessments are just as important, given that fluid job assignments require an adjustment to new constituencies and colleagues, and an adjustment to new work conditions and organizational subcultures. Data about these conditions and cultural characteristics can help an employee more fully appreciate the frame of reference being used by those doing a Tier Two assessment. These data can also help an employee better prepare for and fully understand the nature of the organizational and systemic challenges he is facing. Employees who receive a Tier Three assessment can more fully appreciate those forces operating in their organizational setting that enhance their competencies and those forces that are de-skilling and de-motivating.

Multi-Source Assessment and Organizational Coaching

The employee is usually provided with ample information regarding the way in which his colleagues rate his performance, once the rating scales are completed and compiled. There are often twenty to thirty categories. Data are typically presented in graphic and statistical form with frequencies, means and standard deviations being offered. The employee's own ratings are usually juxtaposed with ratings from the other feedback sources. Sometimes, the ratings are compared with ratings given to other employees

in the organization. The ratings for an employee might even be compared to national norms if the feedback instrument was purchased from a major vendor.

Whether a Two Tier or Three Tier system is engaged, the major challenge is one of managing the complexity of data that must be analyzed. This complexity confronts both those who are administering this system and those who are recipients of this feedback. There are important drawbacks to many 360° feedback processes. The reports that are prepared often produce information overload and may produce a sense of despair, perhaps because multi-source feedback is usually accompanied by very few follow-up services. The employee receives an impressive, highly creditable report filled with colorful charts and graphs. She is told how to make sense of these graphs and numbers—and is then left alone to navigate through the stormy sea this type of report can stir up. Recent research suggests that only forty percent of the multi-source feedback systems are linked to development programs specifically addressing the areas being assessed in the 360° feedback. Much of the bad press regarding 360° feedback processes is generated by this insensitive and often abusive policy of providing the feedback without any follow-up coaching or consulting services.

The qualities being assessed in a 360° feedback process should always be developable, whether this process is being used for personnel decisions or for development. A 360° feedback process can generate several additional psychological storms even if presented in a thoughtful and appreciative manner. That is why this feedback should always be complimented by intensive and extensive organizational coaching. First, the data from other people in the organization can disconfirm an employee's sense of self. Substantial research suggests that there is usually greater concurrence in the ratings of peers, subordinates and superiors, than there is between the self-ratings of an employee and any one of these three groups of raters. Employees are likely to be surprised by the appraisals being offered by other people in their organization. The employees who are least effective and most likely to receive negative feedback are particularly vulnerable, for research studies indicate that these employees are likely to be most surprised by the feedback they receive. They are particularly inclined to over-rate their own performance.

An appreciative approach to 360° feedback and supportive organizational coaching can help to alleviate some of this shock. The appreciative feedback that an employee receives focuses on strengths and

opportunities, rather than deficits and barriers. In learning about his strengths and capabilities, as well as viewing problem areas as opportunities, the feedback recipient can sustain high self-esteem, while also facing the challenge of change and reconfigured images of self. An appreciative coaching approach can also be helpful in this regard because it is always leaning into the future. Feedback recipients are encouraged to forge an image of successful functioning that helps to guide and sustain the employee through the difficult and often destabilizing processes of personal change. Any 360° feedback process will inevitably produce some discomfort with regard to sense of self and level of self-esteem. However, appreciative feedback is much more likely to enable a recipient to turn this discomfort into learning and development than is feedback that has been infused with deficits.

The force of the data received in a 360° feedback process creates a second storm for its recipients. While it is easy to dismiss the feedback from a single source, it is much harder to dismiss this feedback when it comes from several sources and these sources tend to agree with one another. The increasing reliability and validity of the 360° feedback tools that are being used produce even greater threat. There is no way to escape from or discount these finely wrought statistics. Given the credibility of this feedback, the recipient is faced with the task of learning something new about himself. As a learner, he must be willing to seek out additional feedback to gain greater clarity about areas for further development. Feedback recipients must be willing to live outside their comfort zone and take the risk of engaging in activities that challenge their skills and abilities.

A poorly administered 360° feedback process is likely to create yet another psychological storm. This storm arises from the alternation of relationships with colleagues that many 360° feedback processes produce. In most instances, the feedback one receives comes from anonymous sources. The feedback recipient typically doesn't know specifically who has rated him, though the recipient usually helped to create the original list of potential raters. Thus, when the feedback is received, the employee will inevitably wonder who filled out the rating form and why they rated him as they did. The feedback recipient often would like to talk with those who completed the rating; yet, he knows that this can't be done without shattering the anonymity and confidentiality barriers. These are perfect conditions for mild paranoia and for an employee to project his own fears and uncertainties about himself onto other people with whom he works. Without adequate follow-up through use of an organizational coaching process, a

360-Degree feedback process can destroy a sense of teamwork and create a climate of suspicion and mistrust.

Case Study: Sam Agarian

Sam Agarian was for many years CEO of a very large human service agency—I will call it the Human Service Center (HSC)—located in an urban region of the Pacific Northwest. He served as CEO of HSC for twelve years and brought his organization to a place where it was thriving financially and had received many national awards as a “healthy” place in which to work and in which to receive services. Sam came to his 360 Degree feedback and the supporting executive coaching process not as a colleague who was in trouble, but as someone who wanted to sustain and further improve his performance as an organizational leader.

How Did I Get Involved?

I received a call several years ago from a colleague who had recently graduated from a senior level certification program I conducted. I knew from conversations with her (I will call her Sara) that Sara was involved in a comprehensive executive coaching program with HSC. She also informed me that HSC had been involved in a large-scale 360 Degree feedback program for many years and that all of the senior level administration of HSC had participated in this program.

Sara indicated to me that all the vice presidents of HSC had recently received feedback from a 360 Degree process and that they all were receiving executive coaching from Sara or one of her colleagues as a way to make this feedback more useful to them. In the past, little was done other than distribute and interpret the 360 results. I was very pleased that she had been able to couple coaching with the 360. Sara then told me that the president and CEO of HSC had not yet engaged in the latest 360 process. She felt uncomfortable conducting this 360 with him or following up with executive coaching to him. Her reticence was based on her concern that she was already coaching many of his subordinates; furthermore, Sara thought Sam would benefit more from a “senior-level” executive coach who could offer both extensive experience and academic credibility. Sara believed that I would be a good fit. I agreed to take on the assignment.

Why the 360-Degree Feedback and Executive Coaching?

I met with Sam Agagarian in his large, cluttered office that looked out over the city he served. I was more anxious than usual in starting this new executive coaching engagement, in part because I knew of his reputation as a competent and highly acclaimed executive leader. What would I have to offer? Sam and I met twice for two hours apiece to accomplish two tasks. First, we designed a 360 Degree feedback instrument and process that would meet his needs. Second, we both were checking out our relationship to see if a long-term executive coaching process might be appropriate. There was also a third reason that I did not overtly articulate to Sam. I wanted to identify the reasons why he wanted to participate in this feedback and coaching process.

By the end of our first two-hour meeting I had discovered four reasons. Two of the reasons were not very strong. The other two convinced me that this would be a worthy endeavor. I find the first of the reasons to be common among administrators participating in 360s. Administrators engage in 360s because their colleagues have already completed them and everyone “has to take their medicine.” This rather macho approach to 360s is not very helpful. It implies that the 360 feedback is primarily negative in nature and that the recipient is to successfully “defend” against this feedback rather than use it for improvement. All of Sam’s vice presidents had completed the process and Sam “had” to do it to show that he could “take it” just as his subordinates did. This is not a very good reason.

The second reason was also not very convincing. A 360 Degree feedback process had been completed three years ago at HSC and therefore should be done again. Precedence is never sufficient justification for any personal or organizational intervention. There are several benefits, however, to be derived from precedence—if one honors the work already done. As consultants or coaches we can replicate the process previously engaged and in this way gain invaluable longitudinal data about the person or organization we are studying. In this case, I encouraged Sam to use the same 360 instrument that was used three years ago—with several additions and modifications. In this way, we could track changes in the ratings and qualitative feedback he received from this instrument. While the 360 instrument that had been used three years before was not among the best I have seen, it had been tailored for Sam and HSC, and was owned by HSC (hence could be modified without requiring outside permission).

The third and fourth reasons were excellent and led me to reconfirm my acceptance of the 360 Degree feedback and executive coaching assignment. It became clear to me within the first hour of our interaction that Sam was vitally interested in his own ongoing professional development. He strongly (and knowledgeably) supported the use of executive coaching by all of his vice presidents and he was envious of the services they were receiving. Sam wanted his own coach and wanted this coach to begin working with him in conjunction with the data he was about to receive from the 360 feedback.

It became apparent to me almost immediately that Sam could use some assistance in interpreting the 360 feedback, given that he intended (as he did three years before) to request feedback from a broad constituency—more than 20 people. Some of these would be respondents who are members of the HSC staff. Others would come from outside his immediate staff. They would be members of his board of directors, community leaders—even CEOs from institutions that competed with HSC for services. I immediately liked and admired this man and his willingness (even eagerness) to receive and make use of feedback from many different sources.

The fourth reason was also persuasive. My colleague (Sara) had thoughtfully and carefully established a comprehensive executive coaching program that was tied not only to the 360 feedback process, but also to the building of an effective executive management team and establishment of a new master plan for HSC. I trusted Sara's intentions, her competence and her appreciative perspective with regard to coaching (a perspective I strongly embrace). I believe that 360 feedback processes can be powerful and appropriate motivators for engaging in executive coaching. Conversely, an existing executive coaching program can be a constructive and motivating gateway to enter a 360 Degree feedback process. I identify this strategy as “instrumented coaching” and make extensive use of instruments of many different types in my own executive coaching work. (Bergquist and Mura, 2011)

Linking 360 Degree Feedback Processes to Executive Coaching

One of the challenges facing anyone who designs and implements 360 Degree feedback systems concerns the complexity of the information that is collected. If there is to be no follow-up from

the 360, other than one or two hours of interpretation, then the data that are gathered must be kept relatively simple—both conceptually and the way they are presented. There usually are no more than ten to fifteen categories and the data are presented in graphic form (with no more than 2 or 3 data points per category). This restriction is not required if executive coaching supplements the feedback. One can gather rich data that represent many different categories and perspectives. The coach and client can readily work with statistics (such as standard deviation scores rather than just points on a graph) and qualitative data (such as quotations, thematic analyses, metaphors, and vignettes).

Given that Sam and I were going to engage in executive coaching, I suggested that the 360 feedback process contain several unusual components. First, I recommended that the standard categories focusing on Sam's competencies (360 feedback processes are inevitably normative in nature) be supplemented with four items (brief case studies) that would yield information about Sam's interpersonal style (a descriptive rather than normative approach to 360 feedback). Second, I recommended that Sam complete a self-assessment version of the 360 instrument. This version invited Sam to rate himself with regard to both competencies and interpersonal style. Third, I made an unusual request of Sam: I invited him to fill out a third version of the 360 instrument which asked Sam to predict how he thinks his colleagues will rate him with regard to his competencies and interpersonal styles. Sam agreed to all three of these modifications.

The Outcomes

Data were gathered on Sam's competencies and styles from 22 people. There was an impressive 100% rate of return. In addition, Sam completed the Self-Assessment and Prediction versions of the 360 inventory. I assembled all the data (along with written comments made by many of the respondents). Sam and I reviewed the data over a period of two months (two-hour sessions every two to three weeks). Upon completing this intensive review we decided to keep meeting once a month in order to engage in a formal executive coaching process.

During our coaching sessions we decided to address five themes that had emerged from review of the 360 feedback data:

- (1) Several of Sam's major strengths [loyalty, nurturing attitude, thoughtfulness] also gets him in trouble. [Sam is unwilling to make hard decisions, he often delays decisions, and may have too many personal relationships with his subordinates],
- (2) Respondents are worried about Sam burning out. [Sam assumes too much responsibility and works too many hours each day],
- (3) Sam needs to build a stronger vice presidential team and give them more responsibility. [Too many people are going around the vice presidents to work directly with Sam],
- (4) One of Sam's vice presidents is a source of major problems for many members of the organization. [She must be confronted by Sam], and
- (5) Sam is the "heart and soul" of the organization. [Sam must begin (as a man in his early 60s) to address the difficult issue of succession planning].

Sam and I worked on these issues for another two years. During that time he engaged in a major reorganization plan that helped HSC prepare for new leadership. He directly confronted his problematic vice president and began to do a better job of setting boundaries around his own time. The insights he gained regarding his strengths getting him in trouble came directly from the interpersonal style items on the 360 Degree feedback inventory. Sam found the style ratings (descriptive) to be of much greater value than the competency ratings (normative).

Today, as Sam prepares for his own retirement, a new CEO has assumed leadership at HSC. Sam is now working with the parent organization and heading a major strategic planning initiative in the parent organization. He is very pleased with the succession at HSC and is ready for a new journey in retirement as a wise and respected leader in his field.

Conclusions

I suspect that many senior administrators, like Sam, are aware of their shortcomings and their areas of incompetence. What's "news" to them are the many ways in which the strengths on which they have long relied are also sources of their problems and pitfalls. These insights are not simple "oh, that's what happens." Rather, they tend to come from long, reflective deliberations and the analysis of many specific problems—in an ongoing executive coaching process. This is

where executive coaching can benefit most from a linkage to 360 Degree feedback processes and where the future of executive coaching might look particularly bright.

Reference

William Bergquist and Agnes Mura (2011) *Coachbook: A Guide to Organizational Coaching Strategies & Practices*. Available from amazon.com and Kindle.