Use of Assessments in Executive Coaching

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Customized, qualitative 360s, by definition, are constructed on a small sample size. As my clients have told me, a sample size that is too small reduces the power of the 360 and increases the margin of error. Unlike research organizations, we can't readily adjust sample size based on the required confidence level and margin of error. 360s are not meant to be scientific. They are viewed as 'indicative perceptions.' We are thus left with interpretation and follow-on discussions, often accompanied by pushback. I felt uncomfortable when I couldn't support a client's observed behavior with a statement other than 'that's someone's perception.' After hearing this a few times, clients rightfully shut down and question us. At times, I question myself, asking whether I delved deeply enough during the interview.

My reaction to this fair observation is to support the 360 whenever possible with the most appropriate assessment.

The assessments help the client and me fill-in the gaps between expected behavior and what has been observed, and let the client know what is true about himself. It shines a light on a client's personality and disposition that can take a coach months to learn, if ever. And, most importantly, it allows the coach the opportunity to tie 360 feedback with an objective source, the assessment itself.

For example, if a client is seen as being distant or highly reactive, I can turn to the Hogan, delving into Sociability and Adjustment. Being able to do so is comforting and enlightening to the client, who now sees a foundational reason for the 360 comments received. Similarly, acknowledging that we are coaching individuals, I could turn to either a group or individual EQ tool to help a leader better understand why her interpersonal techniques are not effective, or get under the reasons why stress has an impact on her decision-making.

Often, when I draw a connection between the assessment outcome and the 360 comments, clients will move (sometimes physically) from feeling bewildered and doubtful to a sense of comprehending why they are observed in a certain way by colleagues. It can come as a relief to them. This provides me with the opportunity to focus my efforts and disregard results that were off, returning us to the problem of a small sample. For clients, I am more apt to hear "Yes, I've heard that before" or "I've wondered about that" or "Yup, that's me" when I make the connections.

Because the assessment is certainly confidential, clients don't even raise questions or concerns about bias, leaving them in the rare position of just thinking about themselves and, maybe, relaxing. Then, I can use the assessment results combined with the 360 findings to develop a set of more accurate questions for client meetings and create even more specific and targeted development plans.

I believe our clients are willing to accept what they hear from us when our insights and guidance are based on truly comprehensive and objective knowledge and are conducive to improving the coaching outcome and their personal effectiveness.

Frank Faeth is an executive coach with Sloan Group International. SGI provides executive coaching, team facilitation, and leadership development. Prior to being a coach, Frank held senior positions at several of the world's most prestigious companies, including JPMorgan Chase, MasterCard Worldwide and Marsh, Inc. Combining his business background with his executive coaching experience, Frank facilitates professional breakthroughs for executives at all levels. He is accredited in several industry-leading assessments.