

## LEADERSHIP

### Discovering Blind Spots

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Most of us have worked with someone with a “blind spot” — whether it was in their skills, knowledge, behavior, or attitude. While it is usually very easy to see these blind spots in others, most of us simply do not have that same clarity when it comes to ourselves.

The 360° feedback process enables individuals to uncover these blind spots. The process works by having individuals rate themselves on a variety of leadership competencies and skills. In addition, the individual requests feedback from others — typically peers, supervisors, direct reports, and clients and customers. Feedback from responding groups is provided back to the individual

being rated anonymously and is used most effectively for professional development, not performance evaluation. While supervisors may consider 360° results as background for an annual performance evaluation, 360° reports should not, in most instances, be used as a stand-alone annual evaluation.

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#### A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

As part of FMI’s Leadership Institute, each attendee completes a 360° assessment and undergoes an individual coaching session with one of the faculty. At a recent Leadership

Institute program, an attendee, Mark, met with one of our staff to review his 360° assessment. Mark had a demeanor that intimidated most everyone. Our staff member wondered if he might receive his first Leadership Institute black eye when he told Mark that he did not believe Mark had any chance of being promoted with his present people skills.

Two months later, this same staff member was talking with another individual from Mark's company and heard first-hand about his leadership development. The individual from Mark's company asked the staff member, "What did you do to Mark at the Leadership Institute?" She continued, describing a new kindness and consideration coming from Mark. She recounted a particular day when Mark took up a collection for an employee that had missed a few days of work and as a result, was short of money. The example of Mark underscores how powerful the 360° assessment can be in raising individual awareness and self-perception.

While some of these blind spots are easy fixes, other problems can be much more serious and harder to fix. But no matter what is the issue, the first step in personal and professional development is a realistic self-perception. The 360° feedback is the best process, enabling others to point out our blind spots and provide suggestions for improvement. This then allows developing leaders to react appropriately and either develop, correct, or work around these issues and ultimately be more successful.

A recent study by The Hay Group, a global organizational and human resources consulting firm, suggests that senior-level leaders are more likely to see themselves incorrectly. This research confirms previous findings, which examined results from more than 1,200 360° assessments in a number of industries. This research found that senior-level executives had the greatest discrepancies between their own self-image and other's views of them. Moreover, the higher people are in an organization, the less likely they are to see themselves accurately. These leaders tend to overrate themselves and lose touch with those they lead — an inconsistency that can lead to serious leadership problems. A recent university study found that leaders who overestimated their own leadership ability had direct subordinates with significantly lower levels of both job satisfaction and productivity.

While 360° feedback is critical for senior executives, those serious about developing themselves at any level can benefit from these reports. Also, while 360° feedback is most prevalent in business enterprises, leaders in private,

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public, and non-profit sectors can all receive valuable insight from the experience of a 360° report. Anyone who works with people has a need to see himself or herself more clearly to increase their effectiveness.

Organizations that adopt a process of 360° feedback and make the investment to provide this information to their people, send a significant message to their employees about the importance of personal and professional development. In addition, aggregate ratings for managers across an organization aid in identifying enterprise-wide strengths and weaknesses. This, then, enables human resource professionals to focus training and development efforts in the appropriate areas for increased effectiveness.

Self-perception is never a perfect image. Individuals see themselves quite differently from how others do. An indispensable tool, the 360° feedback helps leaders at all levels to see themselves more clearly.

### USE IN PERFORMANCE APPRAISALS

Some organizations are tempted to use 360° feedback for performance appraisals because these assessments often give insight into how raters perceive the ratee's performance in various areas. However, caution should be

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exercised when using 360° feedback for this purpose. If organizations decide to use 360° feedback for appraisal purposes, they should proceed slowly, using feedback only for developmental purposes first, and then, gradually moving toward its use in appraisals as employees become accustomed to the process. Also, employees should know when 360° feedback is being used for performance appraisals.

Finally, companies using 360° programs for both development and appraisal should keep the two uses separate. Tying 360° feedback to performance appraisals increases the possibility that raters and ratees

will attempt to manipulate the process to achieve desired outcomes such as pay raises and promotions. Past research has found that up to 35% of raters changed their ratings when the use of assessments shifted from development to evaluative purposes. In a pilot study of a 360° program, UPS interviewed participants to determine if they would have changed their ratings if their responses were going to be used in their performance appraisals. Raters responded that they would indeed change their ratings by raising or lowering them. The primary purpose of changing ratings would have been to influence outcomes of the performance appraisal. In fact, in a recent survey, half of the companies using 360° feedback for appraisal had discontinued its use in appraisals for those reasons — rating inflation and negative employee perceptions.

As you consider implementing 360° assessments in your organization, remember that tools are only helpful if used in the proper manner. One of the



critical aspects of a successful 360° program is what is done with the feedback that is given. Feedback from 360° assessments can often be shocking to recipients, especially those with greatly different self-perceptions. Less favorable feedback has also been shown to be related to negative reactions and the belief

that the feedback is inaccurate. Therefore, the results of a 360° assessment should be reviewed with a trained facilitator who does not focus solely on negative results. Feedback facilitation should focus on task performance rather than the person, include information about how to improve performance, and provide a goal-setting plan.

An important requirement for success is organizational support for development needs uncovered by the 360°. Organizations should be prepared to offer training and specific action plans based on the results. If 360° feedback is not solicited amidst a supporting organizational culture, if responses are not taken seriously, and if appropriate coaching and follow-up are not performed, the potential benefits of these reports will not be realized.

While not all leaders are interested in discovering their blind spots, exceptional leaders are in a constant exploration to find the best tools to make themselves and those around them better. As evidenced through research and personal stories, it is easy to see how 360° assessments fit the bill. ■

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