

A Perspective on 360 Feedback

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After a recent executive development project, it occurred to me that it might be useful to capture some of the coaching I often give feedback receivers.

Making the Most of 360 Degree Feedback

The 360 degree feedback technique is a common practice in employee coaching and development. There is a wealth of different tools, vendor data bases and interpretation aids. But, in spite of all these developmental riches, it's important for you as the receiver to step back and remember some basic aspects of 360 feedback to get the greatest value.

The Results Are Perceptions of Behavior

The ratings, graphics and comparison statistics provided by most tools are convenient ways to summarize all of the information from feedback givers. That apparent precision, though, can mask the fact that they summarize *perceptions and judgments*, not your behavior itself. Feedback givers will have a range of experiences with you, as well as their own views about whether your actions are appropriate and reasonable. While those perceptions can be valuable, they may only be that.

Raters' Experience and Perspectives Will Vary

You're usually told that feedback givers should have enough experience with you to provide useful information. But, the composition of those groups can vary in important ways. Some people deliberately choose a range of people, including more critical ones, to get as much information as they can. Others will limit the rater sample to people who know them very well.

Even further, different raters have diverse viewpoints. Your manager most likely has the best opportunity to observe and judge how strategically you think. She may be in a poorer position to observe and judge how you provide performance feedback compared to your direct reports. Likewise, peers and direct reports may well have different vantage points about how effectively you work in teams. It's not surprising that their ratings may differ.

Raters Use a Range of Information

Ideally, 360 feedback is based on direct observation of your behavior. But, as mentioned, different raters may lack direct experience with some of the actions covered in the survey. Your raters' feedback probably represents three different sources:

- What they have seen you do
- What they have heard you do
- What they believe you will do

Obviously, the first kind of data is best. It may be, though, that a rater has had little or no opportunity to observe you, for example as you approach disagreements or conflicts. If the survey format doesn't allow a feedback giver to choose a "cannot rate" option, they may be forced to provide their best estimate of what you are likely to do. They might rely on what they've heard directly from you, or from other people. Or, they may try to generalize from what they know about you.

Raters May Remember Different Things

We know that human memory is imperfect. Three-hundred-sixty-degree feedback requires raters to consult their memories and reach an overall judgment about which behaviors you display and how often. As a result, the numbers truly reflect a summary of what the person remembers. That may be a result of regular experience with you. It also may stem from a single dramatic event or episode. Or, it could amount to someone's best recollection of behavior they have never thought about before. The end result is that the exact meaning of your feedback sometimes can be difficult to determine.

Raters Might Have Different Judgment Standards

Raters' standards vary, too. For example, people have different tolerances for confrontation. What some raters view as your refreshing candor, others may see as overly aggressive or even threatening. And raters have different needs. Some of your veteran subordinates, for instance, may be very self-sufficient and need little guidance. Their communication and feedback needs could be quite different from a more junior, less experienced team mate.

Raters Vary in Their Courage to Confront

The 360 feedback technique is based on the ideal of honesty. The assumption is that anonymous feedback to you will be more open and useful. It's important to remember, though, that individuals have different levels of comfort with directness and criticism. Some raters will appreciate the invitation and welcome the opportunity to be candid with you. Others may be more reluctant to be harsh, either because they dislike it, or possibly because they fear retaliation. In any case, a sample of raters probably will include a range of confrontational courage. Their ratings and comments will show it.

Tips for Feedback Receivers

Here are a few fundamentals to keep in mind as you study and digest your feedback:

1. Remember who your raters are. They may have very different experiences, perspectives and levels of candor.

2. Don't take the numbers literally. They capture recall and perceptions. In the cases of peer groups and direct reports, they also summarize the trends in the group's views.
3. Expect some ambiguity. Your raters most likely will do their best to report their experiences. But, given potential differences in their beliefs and judgment standards, your report may not seem to entirely make sense.
4. Avoid assumptions. It's easy, and tempting, to impose your interpretation on the findings. You have a range of people and their perceptions in your hands, though, and your raters may not be completely the same.
5. Use your feedback to start further dialogue. Present only the data, not your interpretations, and let willing raters explain what they had in mind. Dig deeper into what lies behind the numbers, graphs and write-in comments. You will gain a richer understanding of what the results truly mean and how to use them.

360 degree feedback is very common and can be a useful self-development tool. Making the most of it requires time, thought and further exploration with the people who provide it.

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