



Getting The Total Picture

Developing leaders through multi-dimensional feedback

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It is true that perception is often reality – in both advertising and in corporate life. How an individual (at any level in a company) is perceived by his or her boss, direct reports, peers and other key people has a direct impact on that individual's effectiveness, opportunities and, often, career longevity.

As corporate hierarchies flatten, fluid work groups replace static job roles and multiple roles become the norm within today's companies, the concept

of “managing upward” to create a good impression for a direct supervisor has become “managing outward.” The impressions of a larger group of people play a key role in the day-to-day success of an individual within a corporation, and employees who burn bridges, create enemies and build silos can cause real damage to the processes – and profitability – of a company.

A little 360 history

A 360 degree evaluation is a professional development diagnostic

tool that attempts to take a real-world view of an individual's performance by relying on input from more than one source. The 360 evaluation is built on the assumption that when a sampling of the people who interact most frequently with an individual are surveyed, consistent patterns will emerge that will identify both strengths and areas for development. The 360 evaluation seeks to overcome two weaknesses of a single manager's opinion of an individual's performance: potential bias and interaction with the employee limited to a single role.

With Bob Morgan joining the Charlotte Chamber as its new president, the Chamber saw an opportunity for its relatively new management team to use the 360 evaluation tool in order to recognize strengths, uncover gaps and identify areas for development for individuals and for the team as a whole. According to Loretta Dodgen, Ed.D., owner of Multiple Choice Inc., the professional development consulting firm that administered the Chamber's evaluation process, those goals are entirely consistent with the spirit of the 360 degree evaluation tool.

"The goal (of a 360 degree evaluation) is to provide feedback for professional development," says Dodgen. "A 360 is one of a number of tools, and it gives you information you can use to grow."

The 360 degree evaluation (also called "multi-rater") is not a new tool but its popularity has increased, and the tool made significant inroads into the management suites of American business over the last 10 years.

Many paths to "truth"

Many different consultants offer a variety of multi-rater tools, often in forms that are specialized to the core competencies of specific industries or professions. Generic tools are also available, although there is debate about the effectiveness of a tool that has no customization to the job descriptions or core values of the organization being evaluated.

Debate also rages over the ultimate purpose of 360 degree evaluations. Some professionals are adamant that multi-rater evaluations be limited solely to performance development, and argue against their use in job evaluations and salary review, claiming that such use raises suspicion among employees and opens the door for raters to play personal politics. Others believe that the very nature of the multi-rater tool helps to balance out the

individual bias of particular raters and see no harm in the use of the data for job review purposes. Among variables in the debate are the nature of the corporate culture of the company carrying out the reviews and the original stated purpose of the evaluation process.

In the case of the Chamber's evaluation, Dodgen says that it is always challenging to look at a non-profit organization because of the nature of

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— Louis Csoka

an organization that relies on many volunteers to perform its work. Volunteer appreciation and customer perceived value were two of the key areas on which the Chamber's 360 degree evaluation focused.

"The strength of their scores was very affirming," says Dodgen of the evaluation outcome. For a team that has not worked together long and has many new members, that strength was a big positive and something that future coaching will seek to enhance and preserve.

Blair Stanford is the chief operating officer of the Charlotte Chamber. She says that, for her, the 360 degree evaluation process was very helpful because it showed areas where the people providing feedback consistently saw strengths or areas for improvement. It revealed, says Stanford, the gap between intention and perception. "My expectation was that I was going to get some really quality feedback," she says of her thoughts going into the process.

Louis Csoka, Ph.D., is the president and founder of Apex Performance, a performance improvement consulting firm. Apex Performance uses a number of evaluation tools, including 360 degree evaluations, in its work with corporate clients. "The best way to get a better picture of an individual's performance is to get it from different levels of the organization and different individuals," says Csoka. A multi-rater evaluation, says Csoka, provides a much richer picture that neutralizes the effect of "image managing" – the situation when an employee has convinced the boss that his or her skills and performance are stellar while peers and subordinates have a very different impression. It is harder, says Csoka, for sub-par managers to fool peers and subordinates about their competency and interpersonal skills since peers and direct reports work closely on a day-to-day basis with the managers and may be the ones who must clean up the messes. The most powerful messages, says Csoka, come when an evaluation shows that all three groups of raters – boss, peers and subordinates – say the same thing. This opens up key areas for development.

Csoka's multi-rater tool adds another rater to the picture: the individual himself. "A lot of the things don't come from an external source but come from within," says Csoka of the reasons for behavior. Their tool also factors in emotions and physiology through biofeedback technology, and uses biofeedback and

neurofeedback in the post-evaluation coaching to achieve results.

Csoka believes that emotional intelligence is a key element for good leadership, what some call a “heart/brain connection.” Csoka works primarily with C-suite executives, professional athletes, the military and surgeons. Making a positive heart-brain connection, says Csoka, can be aided by biofeedback. “You can’t cheat the machine,” he says. This includes learning to remain cool under pressure by controlling the natural physiological responses to stress. His goal is to change the inner dialogue that led to the external problem by helping the individual assess what he was thinking and what information he was using that led to the problem behavior. Through that awareness, says Csoka, individuals can change their emotional state and get to the root cause of the unwanted behavior.

Getting to the real issue

Dodgen emphasizes the importance of constructing the review tool correctly. If the tool is not customized for the job roles, core values of the organization and key attributes, she notes, the feedback will be vague and less actionable. In the case of the Charlotte Chamber, Stanford notes Dodgen’s pre-evaluation work in constructing a questionnaire that focused on critical skills, job descriptions and corporate vision, and also linked questions to a defined skill set.

Dodgen says it is less effective to give employees their raw data and leave them to interpret it on their own than it is to pair up the evaluation process with a coaching program. Often, a coach from outside the organization is more effective because of perceived objectivity, adds Dodgen. “It is not about whether or not someone is getting a raise,” says Dodgen of the appropriate use of the multi-rater tool. “It measures how different are my expectations of myself and the expectations other people hold of me,” she says.

At the Charlotte Chamber, Stanford says that the data from the evaluation was discussed in group meetings pertaining to general findings, and in more detail in one-on-one meetings. Individual action plans were created based on the feedback from the evaluation data. The Chamber chose to evaluate just the nine people in leadership positions, not every employee in the organization. All nine people report to President Bob Morgan.

“We were pleased at the strength of the leadership team,” says Stanford of the outcome. The Chamber has made the

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— Bob Rosner

choice to incorporate its data from the evaluations into the performance reviews of the management team.

Experts acknowledge that 360 degree evaluations are not perfect. According to author Bob Rosner in his August 11, 2006, “Working Wounded” column for ABCNews.com, “Many employees see a 360 as a way to reward their friends and punish their enemies. One way to reduce this problem is to not use the results in performance reviews or to attach the

results to compensation in any way.” Instead, Rosner recommends using the 360 data solely as a developmental tool, which he believes increases employee trust, and leads to better data.

Highly competitive corporate cultures may unwittingly sabotage the usefulness of the multi-rater tool. “If there is a culture that encourages you to compete with each other for favor within the organization, that is not going to be a good culture for a 360,” says Dodgen. Csoka says that a culture where open communication is the norm makes it easier to get candid and truthful feedback, as opposed to a culture where raters fear retaliation. Very small companies may also have difficulty with the multi-rater tool if they are too small for groups of raters to be truly anonymous or if the same raters are used over and over again.

“In no environment are you going to get completely candid responses,” agrees Stanford. “I don’t think you’d look at this and say, ‘This is the gospel truth,’” she adds, noting that even the best tools have a margin of error. However, notes Stanford, Dodgen designed the questionnaire so that key concepts and questions were asked several times in different ways to elicit more accurate responses and to reduce the risk of a single question being misunderstood or a single answer skewing data or being over- or under-valued.

Ira S. Wolfe, a professional evaluator with Success Performance Solutions, says in the June 21, 2006, issue of his online newsletter “The Total View” that 360 degree evaluations often fail if they are used in place of an annual review, attempt to fix too many problems at once or are seen as a one-stop solution to turn around a failing employee. Wolfe goes on to note that the most successful multi-rater programs are championed at the top of the organization and are constructed so that the items being rated are directly related to job roles,

organizational core values, key proficiencies and company goals.

Csoka says that to be effective, the multi-rater tools rely on the raters being able to make good observations based on experience. If the raters do not have frequent opportunities to observe the person being rated, then the information becomes mere generalizations, and loses validity.

Putting the data to work

Both Csoka and Dodgen agree that while the 360 degree evaluation is a useful tool, its true power comes in the follow-up. For greatest effectiveness, an evaluation is not only reviewed with the person being rated, but it is part of an ongoing coaching program to build on strengths and look for ways to overcome weaknesses. Csoka also says that the best 360 tools are based on well-defined competencies to avoid generalities. Some companies do a pre-evaluation training program for raters to help them learn how to give actionable feedback.

Csoka and Dodgen also agreed on the importance of the 360 degree evaluation tool having top management buy-in. Such top management support also helps to assure that the tools will be used correctly and that resources will be allocated for effective follow-up coaching. It is less likely to succeed, says Csoka, when it pushed from the bottom up. "Human Resources should not be the driving force here," says Csoka.

Pre-evaluation preparation is very important, says Dodgen. She recommends that the development consultant meet with the contact person within the organization to find out the "real" purpose for the process. If the reasons – such as the desire to get "ammunition" to fire a problem employee – are incompatible with the productive use of the tool, she will warn against the usage and try to help the organization refocus its goals.

Multi-rater evaluation tools can provide organizations with valuable data. And while they are not a solution in and of themselves, when combined with knowledgeable coaching, they can give companies a way to recognize the strengths of their key employees while uncovering opportunities for development. While any evaluation tool can be a source of anxiety, 360 degree tools strive to minimize bias and create a better-rounded picture of an

individual's personal and business skills. And for all their limitations, multi-rater reviews strive to address the lament of poet Robert Burns, who wished: "O would some power the gift to give us to see ourselves as others see us." **V**

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