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Constructive criticism

Helpful hints at extracting value from the 360-degree feedback process

By NATALIE MICHAEL, MA, CPCC

I got an email last week from a long-standing client who was feeling down because he had just received his 360-degree feedback results with some comments that took him by surprise. He wanted some executive coaching to help him dissect the gap between his self-perception and how others perceived him. There was clearly a gap. When I got his call I could relate. About 10 years ago I was put through a 360-degree feedback process and although on the whole the results were good, there was one comment that I could not shake. Like my client, I was not a happy camper.

Many companies have 360-degree feedback processes, but they don't realize how tough it can be on leaders to get feedback, especially if the feedback does not fit with their self-perception. If you are having your own "360 moment," here is some information that will help you get through it and learn from it.

Key principles for getting started

When you read your 360 results, it is important to hold the perspective that it is valuable information, no matter what the results say. I would even go as far as to say it is a gift because it gives you insight about how your style impacts others. As a leader with the power to hire and fire people, you may not get this information

otherwise, even though it is critical for your ongoing success.

But, in order to get the most out of the feedback experience, you need to be in the right mindset to soak it in. The starting point is to understand some key assumptions about leadership and interpersonal relationships which are inherently built into the 360 process. These are:

1. People perform and are more engaged at work when they have positive relationships.
2. When you are lucky enough to have a mutually productive and positive work relationship, this is a huge asset and it should be celebrated and maintained.
3. If you find that there are areas for improvement in the relationship and you decide to actively work on the relationship, you are demonstrating that you value and respect the other person's view even if it does not match your own.
4. To work effectively with others, you don't have to change your inherent style, but it is valuable to develop versatility. Basically, if you develop a wide variety of skills for handling interpersonal relationships, and you become skilled at interacting with people who are different from you, you will be more effective as a leader.

If you disagree with any of these four assumptions, you might need to examine why.

The feedback mindset

There are a few points in the core assumptions which are important to emphasize: Namely, that 360 feedback is all about relationships and versatility. Your feedback results answer the question: "What impact am I having on these people?" This is different from "Am I a good leader?" You may be an awesome leader in other situations and with different types of teams, but your 360 results won't show that. They simply tell you whether or not your style is effective and productive with these individuals. Although this may sound trite, it is a major point. So many people come to me and say, "I just don't get it! All of my past 360 results have been stellar." This makes sense. Everyone can be successful somewhere and every style has its strengths and weaknesses. These results just tell you whether or not your style is effective right now.

Why the disconnect happens

If you see the results and they don't match your self-perception, a logical question is "Why?" David Merrill and Roger Reid in *Personal Styles and Effective Performance* explain it well. They say leaders develop behavioural habits. In the most basic sense, people tend to do things that make them comfortable and they avoid things that make them uncomfortable or cause

them tension. Once we discover that a certain pattern of action makes us comfortable and it gets a certain result, we tend to repeat it, especially if it is positively reinforced.

These behavioural habits begin early in life. For example, parents who want their children to be assertive often seek out teachers, friends and coaches that reinforce this type of behaviour. Soon this accepted type of behaviour becomes so ingrained that a person may not even realize it is a habit. This happens to all of us. We repeat the behaviours that made us comfortable and successful in the past. Later in life we choose activities and occupations that are an extension of this basic style and avoid situations that disapprove of it or suggest that another mode of behaviour is more effective. We also tend to label people who act differently from us as “bad” and people who are similar to us as “good.”

We can keep going along this way our whole life, but if you are a leader you will likely at some point have an “Aha” moment which reveals the limitations of your habits. For example, Jim is the CEO of a retail chain. He initially did not want to do a 360-degree feedback because he knew that he was not having a

positive impact on others. There was 100 per cent turnover on the executive team. He tried to justify his position by saying, “I don’t care what these people think. They are all too junior and they don’t understand why I behave the way I do.” I thought to myself, “Umm . . . they are all you got. Everyone else has left.”

His 360 results revealed that his view of his behaviour – strategic, assertive, results-oriented – was being perceived as pushy, rude, disrespectful and exhausting. Ouch. The good news is that Jim soaked up the feedback and really considered why this disconnect was happening. He realized that although his style was comfortable to him and maybe to senior executives, it was not comfortable for his current team – the people he was relying on to run his company. He had to figure out how to shift his behaviour so he

had just enough pressure to motivate his junior team but not so much that he was killing morale. It was not that his style was inherently bad or good, it was just that it was not productive in this circumstance.

How to get the most from the 360-degree feedback

So, if you are blindsided by your feedback, here are five tips to

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1. Be like a scientist. When you first open the feedback packet, get yourself in the mode of the objective observer. Tell yourself, "This will be interesting. I get to see how my behaviour is impacting the team and I can learn how to create more productive relationships." Know that whatever the results say, it is revealing something about you and about the people you are working with.

2. Reduce defensiveness. If you want to get something out of this process and become a more mature, effective leader, you need to self-manage your defense reactions. Do a little inventory of the fight or flight response before opening the packet. "If I don't like what I hear, will I want to fight back and argue the results? Or, will I withdraw inside myself?" Take a note of your own immediate reaction and then ask yourself, "What is a healthy mature response?" Knowing this upfront can help you to self-manage.

3. Aim for versatility. When you look at the results, ask yourself: "Does this reveal that I am able to successfully lead and interact with different types of people? Am I able to create productive relationships with people who are different from me?" Looking at the results from this lens is the gift of 360 feedback and it clarifies

where you need to focus your development efforts. For example, do you tend to feel more comfortable with technical people, rather than highly social ones? If you have some social people on your team, what can you do to make the relationship more productive?

4. Evaluate the feedback. As you read the feedback, evaluate what the messages are saying. If you have some positional power, people may temper their comments with things like, "He can be opinionated, but I am glad we know where we stand." Don't be fooled by this. Ask yourself: "When does my opinion get in the way of team relationships?" On the other hand, if some feedback doesn't ring true for you, ask yourself, "What could be going on with the other person that would lead to this perception?"

5. Don't change your style. Add to it. Recognize that the goal is to develop more versatility in your style, not change it all together. The goal is to become less "style limited" and to add a broader range of behaviours to your repertoire for better results. If you do this, people will see fewer style differences between you and them, and they will value your ability to accommodate their preferences. This, in turn, leads to better productivity, more fun, and effective relationships. And, surprise, surprise, that's the point of a 360! ■



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