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Listening to Leaders: Feedback on 360-Degree Feedback One Year Later

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Abstract

This paper illuminates the value that 360-degree multi-rater feedback offers organization leaders, leader teams, and organizations. The focus is how organization leaders make a difference. Nineteen out of forty-two CEOs, COOs, and senior level leaders in five large organizations responded to a follow-up survey one year after completion of a multi-rater feedback process. Respondent comments are listed and then classified using two new OD typologies. Fifty-four out of fifty-nine multi-rater feedback responses revealed significant, enduring individual, team, and organizational improvements.

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"It's What We Learn After We Know
It All That Really Counts"

John Wooden
Retired UCLA basketball coach

Introduction

Learning and development needs of leaders are growing. Reasons include need for strategic responses to terrorism, globalization, ecommerce, alliances, mergers and acquisitions, flattened organization structures, growing virtual work, and others. To successfully address these trends organizations increasingly use multi-source feedback and rapid learning to enhance leader capability and behavior change.

Overview of 360-Degree Feedback

Multi-rater or 360-degree feedback is essential for overcoming leader blind spots and enhancing their overall emotional intelligence (Goldman, 2000). Multiple view feedback is a popular and influence-building tool for OD professionals to assess organizational leader, and leader teams. The approach provides leaders with a list of behavioral-based strengths and improvement areas as identified by survey responses from self, superior, peers, direct reports, and sometimes customers. Respondents complete 360-degree feedback questionnaires anonymously.

Typically, multi-feedback raters identify leader strengths and developmental gaps by comparing survey statements of what is expected or desired in the leader role, versus their actual perceived behavior in their role. Collectively, the summary feedback is used to identify which behaviors a leader needs to enhance job performance, and which current behaviors should continue as is. Successful 360-degree feedback is not automatic. The process must be properly positioned, implemented, and followed-up over time.

A multi-rater process offers leaders an opportunity for greater self-awareness. Does this awareness translate into action, added value, or organization results? Do leaders

*Does this awareness
translate into action,
added value, or
organization results?*

improve and sustain improvements? Do leadership teams function better? In short, how do organization leaders make a positive difference? Little is known or at least reported about effects

from feedback, especially over time. This paper contributes to the scant amount of literature and overwhelming need to link leader assessment and development efforts to individual, team, and organization results.

Method

Fifty-nine survey responses were collected from nineteen senior leaders rated by one hundred ninety observers in five large companies. Participant organizations included three multi-state financial institutions headquartered in the Western United States, a global healthcare device manufacturing business headquartered in the Midwest, and a global research center at a top-ten university also located in the Midwest. Initial 360-degree assessment and feedback results gave executive leaders a basis and direction for behavior change. It is these results which the survey investigated one year later. The objective was to determine and classify results for individual leaders, leader teams, and their organizations at large.

The study began with in-depth interviews of five CEOs from participating enterprises one year after each completed the same multi-rater tool. Follow-up survey feedback was then conducted with the CEOs, and their direct leader teams. Each was asked to complete a brief, confidential survey. The leaders had received

360-degree feedback collected from one hundred ninety raters, or approximately ten observers each. Now, they were asked if the feedback had generated on-the-job behavior change. CEO comments were self-identified, while comments from their senior leader direct reports were anonymously submitted to the author for analysis. Nineteen, or forty-five percent of the forty-two individuals who were sent a survey responded.

Significance

This investigation is unique in several respects. While Waldman and Atwater (1998) report at least twenty-five percent of all organizations use the multi-rater feedback approach, little structured follow-up has been conducted to assess impact. This paper offers data in the words of leaders themselves. These statements support the assertion that 360-degree feedback is indeed worthwhile. Moreover, two simple, yet unique OD data classification system typologies are offered below to organize subjective leader comments. First, Typology A, offers one categorization method for leader remarks. Responses are classified according to three levels of outcome to the multi-rater feedback they received:

- **Primary outcomes** are reported behavior changes made when leaders act in a different, significant way in response to the feedback;
- **Secondary outcomes** are less significant, but beneficial insights or behavior changes of a leader; and
- **Neutral outcomes** are insights about the multi-rater feedback or about the feedback process itself which a leader perceived as "no" benefit.

Second, Typology B arranges leader comments on a matrix of four organizational change dimensions:

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1. **Intra-Personal change** is change having the most impact within the leader, which affected self-awareness, thinking ability, or other internal functioning.
2. **Inter-Personal change** is change with an impact on individuals and teams with whom the leader interacts.
3. **Organizational change** is change with an impact on the leader's organization as a whole, such as increased operating income, return on investment, sales margin, sales revenue, or general efficiency improvements.
4. **No change** is change with no perceivable impact.

Survey Questions and Results

Senior leaders responded to three survey questions. Their answers are classified according to the two typologies, A and B, described above.

QUESTION #1: Since the multi-rater process was completed one year ago, has your productivity, cost-savings, efficiency, communication, internal or external customer satisfaction or other benefit resulted in any-

way due to the behavior feedback you received?

A total of 12 of 19 respondents (or 63%) noted yes on the survey questionnaire, and 7 (or 37%) said no. Many respondents added one or more subjective

comments. For example, 25 comments were received with 22 (or 88%) positive remarks, and 3 (or 1%) judged neutral or negative. Hence, most respondents believe 360 feedback favorably improved work practices at the individual, team, and/or organization level. A majority also concluded that significant and lasting change (of at least one year) occurred.

... most respondents believe 360 feedback favorably improved work practices at the individual, team, and/or organization level.

Verbatim responses from the nineteen organization leaders follow:

Typology A: Primary Outcomes (Key Leader Actions, Change or Results):

1. During our executive management weekly team meeting a proposal emerged to measure external customer satisfaction in a gap fashion similar to what we did with our team, so we're acting on this!
2. Co-coaching among VPs is now established!
3. I'm now getting the right VP team on the field.
4. We now have a senior manager representative to sit on our executive team for improved communication up-and-down our business.
5. The process motivated me, gave me permission to be more directive, especially with balanced feedback to my direct reports.
6. I recognize now more fully my strengths and weaknesses; it confirmed my own awareness significantly.
7. I feel more focused on strategic imperatives.
8. I've taken your advice and have written two job descriptions for senior level new hires to help redesign the organization.
9. There's improved communication within/ among our group.
10. I'm more self-aware about my impact on others. As a result I'm careful not to dismiss others' input in the face of my own ideas!
11. Better teamwork among VPs.
12. There's more interpersonal flexibility & adaptiveness.
13. We have better ability to assess individuals and meld them into the organization in a timely manner.

14. I have stopped trying to meet everyone's expectations and am more focused on what I need to get the job done.
15. The process showed where improvement is needed; I'm working on better internal communication.
16. Our executive off-site was much more productive because of the multi-rater report; it served as a foundation for discussion and for reactions around continuous improvement.
17. Our roles and expectations are clearer as a result of a feedback meeting where we discussed the multi-rater results.
18. Knowledge of key team skill gaps made recruitment faster and more effective.
19. My executives communicate more often and more meaningfully since they received feedback.

Secondary Outcomes (Less Significant Leader Actions, Changes, or Results)

20. It's valuable to have all the feedback in one report
- (both for us as individuals and for our executive team)
21. Your report acts as a guide for me
 22. You offered a 3rd party perspective which confirmed and offered rich information for our improvement; I'm going to use your visits and report as support for some of what I've tried to do and say here!

Neutral or Negative Outcomes

23. Little improvement in cross-divisional communication and cooperation.
24. I'm unaware of any benefits.
25. We're all much more aware, but I haven't seen much difference in actions by other participants.

QUESTION #2: Have you consciously behaved different based on the multi-rater feedback data/report that you received?

Out of a total of 16 responses, 15 (or 94%) were positive, with 1 (or 6%) responding negative. Subjective comments are noted below.

Typology A Primary Outcomes

26. Have implemented more timely status reporting on projects and now use "milestones" with my team.
27. I've engaged an executive coach to work on improving my communication style.
28. Instituted weekly sales leads meeting for information Exchange.
29. I do more action oriented planning (3 additional leaders mentioned this outcome)
30. same answer as 29
31. same answer as 29
32. same answer as 29
33. I've returned to trusting my own instincts and experience and am actively working on how I communicate my needs and desires without being dictatorial.
34. As a CEO I'm more "open" now in my communication.
35. I now explain more and gain commitment on expectations.
36. I notice improved communication with staff.
37. I'm focused now on my area of greatest improvement Need.
38. I'm more formal in my communications.
39. I try to follow-through more consistently.
40. I'm more assertive.
41. I clarify communications and expectations more.

Secondary Outcomes

42. My self awareness is considerably expanded and impacts my overall functioning in many dimensions.
43. My communication style is much improved.

Neutral Outcomes

44. Am more aware of strengths and weaknesses but am unsure if it affects my behavior.

QUESTION #3: Have you noticed your executive leader team behaving different in anyway since receiving multi-rater feedback? If so, please state how?

Out of a total of 15 responses 13 (or 87 %) responses were positive, with 2(or 13%) negative.

Typology A Primary Outcomes

45. We've implemented a "Contract With Myself" process to work on closing identified skill gaps, and I see positive changes already.
46. Awareness of gaps allowed me to create a game plan around the mix of executive talent I need.
47. VPs largely communicate more and let each other know what's happening.
48. We look for others' input more.
49. We're thinking differently now, more strategic!
50. We're better at professional confrontation now.
51. Line employees are involved since they know VPs/managers are under scrutiny.
52. VPs are leaving their negative emotions at the door now, since they are far more alert to listening to subordinates.
53. Were better at "straight talk" with one another.
54. Improved our thinking, we're more like entrepreneur's Now.
55. We now plan better.
56. Listening skills have improved.
57. Our senior team is now more focused on results.

Secondary Outcomes

None determined.

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Negative or Neutral Results

58. There wasn't enough follow-up and reinforcement.
59. It's taken everyone time to digest all the information.

Typology B:

Figure 1 below offers a second OD typology to enhance our understanding of data impact. The above fifty-nine subjective leader responses are categorized according to four OD change dimensions (Intra-Personal, Inter-Personal, Organization-wide, or No Change). Readers may refer to each survey feedback question number below, then identify the OD impact category. Significantly, this typology illuminates both the range of leader responses and their impact on four change levels.

Implications

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence is not an act, but a habit"

Aristotle

The two new OD classification typologies offer clarity about impact and benefit of 360 degree feedback as a high-involvement tool. Figure 1 presents 59 leader comments. Nineteen (or 32 %) are categorized in the Intra-Personal change dimension, 31 (or 53%) fall in the Inter-Personal or team improvement dimension, 4 comments (or 6%) fit the Organizational Effectiveness (improvement) category. Only 5 (or 8%) reflect no change among leaders after completion of the multi-rater feedback process.

Above findings suggest that organization leaders see 360-degree feedback as beneficial to improve self (Intra-Personal) functioning. Moreover, greater improvement in Inter-Personal and team effectiveness resulted, since almost twice as many responses are noted here (31) as compared to Intra-Personal change (19). This may exemplify the growing

Figure 1

59 EXECUTIVE LEADER SURVEY RESPONSES (N = 19) CLASSIFIED BY 4 CHANGE-IMPACT DIMENSIONS				
4 CHANGE DIMENSIONS	INTRA-PERSONAL 19 Responses	INTER-PERSONAL (TEAM DEVELOP.) 31 Responses	ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS (O. E.) 4 Responses	NO CHANGE 5 Responses
SURVEY RESPONSE NUMBER	5, 6, 7, 10, 14, 21, 27, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 37, 39, 40, 42, 44	1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 26, 28, 36, 38, 41, 43, 45, 47, 48, 50, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57	8, 46, 49, 51	23, 24, 25, 58, 59

trend and need for collaboration in order to accomplish strategic business goals. Each team member's performance becomes more and more important. Weak members compromise overall productivity and place additional burden on higher performers; resentment often results.

Four (or 7%) of survey comments denote organization improvements. A more complete discussion of specific gains in organization effectiveness, especially financial growth due to multi-point feedback, is discussed elsewhere (Vinco and Green, 2000).

Typology A and B above deepen the overall debate on usefulness of 360-degree tools and subsequent development. They offer evidence that multi-source feedback is more than a passing fad. These findings stretch our collective understanding beyond the realm of simple leadership awareness building, an ever-so-typical outcome of most assessment tools used in HR, Training, and OD. The current study demonstrates that 360-degree feedback offers multi-faceted benefit in several categories of impact. Hence, skepticism about the long-term

benefit of such feedback should now be reduced.

Reluctance of many CEOs, COOs, and division executives to fund leadership assessment and development is often founded on the notion that little if any results are demonstrable or sustainable. A typical response is "So what?" or "What good is it?" This stance is unjustified. Outcomes from this study demonstrate that behavioral change by organization leaders do indeed occur, and last for at least one year or more. Also, many reported improvements are significant, such as those categorized as Primary. In addition, the four-tiered OD change typology is a useful starting point for identifying the full range of impact which multi-rater feedback can produce.

Both OD data classification typologies offer insight into the potential multiple dimensions for which multi-rater feedback is useful. Whether OD professionals are external or internal, each now has a basis for assessing what to expect and how worthwhile multi-source feedback can be. Furthermore, the above classification systems are useful to analyze other existing

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OD feedback data in order to interpret impact on leaders, teams, and systems.

We live today in an “attention-deficit economy” with its resultant “initiative fatigue” — where our time to address business initiatives is stretched very thin (Davenport and Beck, 2000). Knowing ourselves, our teams, and improving our behavior impact is critical to achieve results. Research herein shows that one path to achieve this objective is multi-rater feedback.

The study reported above focuses OD professionals on results which CEOs, COOs, and senior level VPs require before they commit needed resources to leadership assessment and learning initiatives. The feedback data also allows OD practitioners and our customers to more genuinely assess desired and realistic outcomes. It is hoped that companies will continue to support 360 feedback as a core development process.

Findings herein promote the OD value of strengthening human awareness building and resultant behavioral action as a critical link to promote individual, team, and organization improvement. Findings also move our collective wisdom beyond generic process and content consultation methods to further support 360 feedback as an example of “middle range” consultation, reviewed previously (Green, 1993).

Multi-source 360 feedback and development is a “middle-range” consultation method because it makes use of both the client’s own understanding of their skills, combined with an openness to appreciate and incorporate feedback from others. This occurs under the guidance of a skilled content-oriented facilitator.

While the current study revealed surprising leader behavior improvements, *how* change took place was not a major focus. Typology A with its specific leader feedback statements offers us many insights, but more investigation is needed. For example, what are the specific learning events and process used by leaders to improve? How did leaders seek, give, or

receive feedback? What did they do specifically with their feedback?

Was team support involved, and if so how much? Could mutual or “relational leadership” be a key team success criteria as Drath (2000) suggests? In Drath’s novel approach leaders don’t become leaders in isolation. Leaders help leaders become who they are, and who they wish to be. Several noted authors address the leader development process, but further investigation remains (Foster and Kaplan, 2001; Conger and Benjamin, 2001; Cashman, 1998).

By reading the specific reported leader comments above much is revealed about *what* behaviors senior leaders improved in themselves, their teams, and organizations. We know anecdotally that specific steps to ‘how’ leaders improved included actions such as attendance at several executive and management development training workshops, self-study via reading business books and professional articles, team building discussions, observing skill development videos, and working with an ongoing external executive coach.

Organization leaders who participated in this study have cast a long term appreciative eye on results from feedback they received. To this end Robert Browning’s words remain as true today as they were when written in the 1770’s: “Oh, what a great gift it is to see ourselves as others see us.”

To see ourselves as leaders, to broaden our awareness of our own job behavior, and to act to improve job behavior is indeed a gift. Multi-source 360-degree feedback is a spring-board to achieve this goal.

Conclusion

This paper addressed the impact of 360-degree feedback on nineteen organization senior leaders in five large organizations. Enterprise leaders noted change at three OD

Leaders help leaders become who they are, and who they wish to be.

levels: individual, team, and large system. Two new data classification typologies categorized leader comments from a survey questionnaire distributed one-year after implementation of the 360 degree development method. The research reported above demonstrates that 360 feedback is more than a 'rage du jour'. It supports the productivity renaissance among today's knowledge work leaders. OD practitioners can point to sizeable 'value-adds' due to this study. Furthermore, they now have a more complete set of tools and qualitative evidence of long lasting benefit. Findings, as well as the two feedback tools which classify findings, bolster knowledge and methods to enhance our profession and, moreover, to improve OD practice.

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