

## Tip #11

### THE VALUE OF THE COACH IN A 360° PROCESS

The crux of any 360° feedback process is in the follow-up. A good 360° is not a personality test. It focuses on behaviors, and, unlike personality, behaviors can change. But people will not focus time and energy on changing unless they believe that they can change – and they know how to make it happen.

Bill Bowerman, the co-founder of Nike, is quoted as saying “The athlete makes himself; the coach doesn't make the athlete.” The athlete must believe in his/her power to take charge, deal with circumstances, and ultimately succeed. The coach's job is to provide a methodology, a way of thinking, a system that enables the athlete to move forward and reach the goal. The coach doesn't “do” – the coach guides. It's the same in business.

### WHAT IS 360 COACHING – WHAT IS IT NOT?

Coaches help participants digest information in a way that makes sense to them. They “pull” instead of “push,” i.e., they work to understand participants' needs in order to gain a commitment to change rather than forcing a change. Some organizations think 360° feedback is a great way to help a “problem” employee see how they are coming across. They approach the process as though it were an intervention, similar to

techniques used to deal with addictions. But research shows that most employees become less motivated (not more motivated) to change when approached with negative feedback – especially when the feedback is focused on personal behaviors rather than task behaviors (as is often the case with 360° feedback).

Most HR professionals understand this very well. Ask them how many employees that are put on “performance improvement plans” actually improve. They will tell you almost none. Those plans typically focus on what employees have done wrong; they therefore believe their boss is trying to get them fired and performance typically declines.

### KEEPING A POSITIVE FOCUS

Documented research shows that 360° feedback that is “strength-focused” is more likely to increase motivation to change, improve, and perform. This has also been shown in research related to employee performance and employee engagement. When the Corporate Leadership Council did a study on performance a few years ago, they found that the most important factor driving performance was the “fairness and accuracy of informal feedback” – and research shows that negative feedback is more likely to be perceived as inaccurate.

That's where the coach comes in. Coaches can help feedback recipients stay focused and make the positive behavioral changes needed for growth by providing context, sharing observations, asking questions, offering options and recommending resources. The goal is to reassure feedback recipients that they can, indeed, be masters of their fate.

This in turn makes the process more effective, and the outcome more beneficial to the organization.

## WHAT IS A COACH TO DO?

Let's look at how a coach might help someone having the following common reactions to their 360°.

### Misunderstanding the Data

360° data reports may detail an individual's strengths and weaknesses, but usually provide minimal guidance on how to understand the context of what you are seeing. This means that misinterpretation about what the feedback report tells you is common. Some people look at the top and bottom items in isolation, never noticing that certain patterns are present. Some don't notice strong differences between perspectives that may impact understanding. And we have seen some look at negative scores and say, in effect, "Based on this report I would say I'm completely incompetent to do my job."

That's why understanding context is important. Participants need to understand "halo effects" and how certain characteristics that are more salient to the rater will influence many scores. Research has shown that your manager may put more emphasis on your business and technical skills, while your direct reports put more emphasis on your interpersonal skills. So high and low ratings in any area may mean something different depending on where they came from. Individuals should also remember that 360° items are not job-specific in the sense that they don't evaluate your technical knowledge; what they do evaluate are specific behaviors that can be useful for any job.

In a nutshell, participants must understand what the data report DOES tell them and what it DOES NOT tell them.

### Focusing on a Single Score/Rater

Think about our typical reaction to feedback. When you got your report card in high school, did you look first at the A's? No. If you were like most people, your focus went immediately to your lowest grades as you thought "What did I do wrong?" "How did I screw up now?" It's really difficult for some managers receiving feedback for the first time NOT to focus on the most negative scores on the report.

Even managers with very high scores will hone in on the one employee who gave them 2s. Often, the feedback recipient thinks they know who that person is and, depending upon their opinion of that person, may obsess about or ignore the lower scores. Some feel the need to "play detective," which, if acted upon, effectively shuts down the process. Nothing introduces fear and resistance into a 360° program quite as much as managerial efforts to find out who gave particular ratings.

An effective coach can help participants get past any initial resistance and move on to acceptance. Of course, the specific circumstances that are causing challenges are important to take into account. But coaches can help participants find a balance between discounting circumstances unique to one individual and obsessing about them. Even if one person scored them low across the board, major themes – good and bad – generally remain the same. A good coach must help the person see past special circumstances to think about the big picture.

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### **Denying the Results**

Among levels of defensiveness, this one ranks high. When feedback is negative – or more negative than expected – it can be very painful. Research shows that negative feedback is more likely to be perceived as inaccurate. Those with low scores may completely dismiss the feedback or decide that they cannot change something because of their own performance goals: “I don’t have time to get input from everyone before I make a decision – I have a job to do.” This is, of course, the opposite of what we hope will happen.

The challenge facing the coach is how to get participants to accept results that may be damaging to their self-esteem. One of the things less qualified coaches do is try to use the 360° to “prove” that an employee has problems – a blunt approach that, as mentioned earlier, often builds resistance. Participants must understand that 360° feedback is based on perception and it is natural for perceptions to differ. However, others’ perceptions are their reality and participants have to be able to deal with them.

The coach must help the participant frame the results appropriately. How and why are the ratings inconsistent with their own beliefs about themselves? If they believe the feedback paints an inaccurate picture of their behavior, what might be leading to those perceptions? When have they been successful in performing contrary to what is being reported? How were those circumstances different? What approaches were taken? Can those be useful again now? Delving deeper into these areas can help a participant focus on behavior changes that might alter existing perceptions.

Adults are often motivated by goals – business goals, career goals, and personal goals. A participant who denies the results may fail to understand how perceptions can impact their ability to reach their goals. They miss the opportunity to find a better solution or gain the buy-in that will help them achieve success. A good coach gets people to focus on their goals and think about how perceptions – accurate or not – may affect them.

### **Becoming Disheartened**

Depression upon seeing negative results is also common. We have seen participants become so discouraged with their 360° results that they seriously consider leaving the company. They see no other options. Here again it is important to remind participants that 360° feedback is based on perceptions of behavior and not necessarily the recipient’s true ability.

A good coach concentrates on what the individual is experiencing and asks them to think objectively. What behaviors might lead raters to this conclusion? Can you envision any times when you might have engaged in these or similar behaviors? If the results are inconsistent with the way in which the recipient perceives him or her self, ask them to think about their current job – their goals and challenges. What might be going on that raters are unaware of?

For example, one manager was very upset by results implying that he was arrogant and uncommunicative. During a coaching discussion, however, he spoke about workload and lack of time and doing two jobs – and then suddenly realized that some of his people were only getting what was “left-over.” He admitted that his behavior of abruptly cutting off discussion and not engaging in small talk – all efforts to better

manage his time – might be perceived as arrogance. This insight led to a willingness to accept the feedback and think about ways to change this perception.

### **Feeling Over-confident (There Is Nothing They Need To Do)**

Occasionally a feedback recipient receives a report that is universally positive. Flattered and happy, they assume that they don't have to take any action because everything is going well. Some organizations inadvertently reinforce this idea by providing interpretation guidelines dealing with absolute numbers, e.g., any score of 4.3 or higher (based on a 5-point scale) can be considered a strength.

Unfortunately, the guidelines usually don't take into account the relativity of feedback scores. In many organizations 360° feedback scores tend to be "inflated" (though this can be affected by culture), e.g., almost everyone receives a 4 or 5 on everything. But if most of your scores average 4.7 or more, an item receiving a 4.3 may well be something to examine. Although still a good score, people are telling you that you don't do as well here as you do in other areas.

Participants who think they have no "bad news" are often resistant to feedback. One individual whose scores indicated that his direct reports wanted more feedback from him simply said, "I already do that." His initial instinct was to discount the issue. The coach had to frame the discussion around why disagreeing with the results did not eliminate the issue. His direct reports obviously felt that whatever he was currently doing was not enough, and in order to let them know that

he had heard the feedback, he would need to do something different.

### **Wanting You to Tell Them What to Do**

Often during a coaching session, we get the question, "What should I do?" But as we said in the beginning, the role of the coach is not to provide answers. Indeed, when the coach may have only a superficial understanding of a person's situation, it would be presumptuous for him or her to imply that they have all the answers.

The coach's job is to ask questions that allow people to draw their own conclusions. Many times participants already know the issues and the answers. All they need is some reassurance that they are moving in the right direction or that their instincts are probably correct. In these cases, a coach can offer encouragement and ask questions to make sure the participant has thought through the issue objectively and is not reacting emotionally. The coach may offer his or her insights, suggest options and/or recommend resources. But the final decision must rest with the participant, because that person needs to own the behavior and the resolution.

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Let's face it – feedback is hard. Behavioral change can occur as a result of a 360° process, but it's neither automatic nor a given. Feedback recipients should not be left hanging. Coaches can help them get past their normal resistance and move toward action.

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