



Incorporating 360-Degree Feedback into a Long-term Leadership Development Program

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At what point does a leadership development program become a tool for personal transformation? Is there a magical mix of concepts, methods, people, environment, and timing that will guarantee that your leadership program will turn people on their heads and get them seeing things from a whole new perspective? When it does happen, even with just one or two leaders, it is a very powerful experience. What I have found in working closely with hundreds of supervisors over the past 7 years is that 360° feedback is an essential part of that magic.

Leaders are far more likely to listen and respond to feedback when they recognize that it is essential to their own growth and performance as a leader. That is why 360° feedback works best, not as a stand-alone survey, but when integrated as part of an organization's leadership development process. In partnership with The Browne Center for Innovative Learning at the University of New Hampshire, I have designed and led 21 two-week leadership institutes for over 400 front-line manufacturing supervisors in a Fortune 100 company. The program, which focuses on interpersonal leadership skills, involves eight facilitators and uses a wide variety of experiential learning methods both in the classroom and out on the high ropes course. We use 20/20 Insight GOLD to conduct needs assessments, implement pre- and post-360's, and evaluate the program's effectiveness.

In Week One, we begin with team building activities to build cohesion and create a learning environment and then focus on communication and differences in behavioral styles. At that point supervisors, many of whom have not had formal leadership training, come to recognize that they are not alone with their struggle to create a work environment where people are motivated, inspired to work together, and want to continuously learn and improve their performance. That is when we orient them to the 360 process and discuss the value of hearing different perspectives on their leadership from their direct reports and peers. With the 20/20 Insight web-based assessments, we are able to have 360 surveys in the hands of their respondents by the time they return to their workplace. In manufacturing environments, many front-line workers do not have Internet access. Supervisors will often make their own computers available to their direct reports. We simply send a survey to the supervisor's e-mail address with the direct report identified as the user. Since supervisors will be the only ones to see their results, there is no incentive to abuse this process; and passwords ensure the direct report's confidentiality.

When participants return to Week Two six weeks later, they are almost immediately hit with their 360 report in an Interpretation workshop. While most participants find the feedback quite interesting with much-to-their-surprise affirmations of what they are doing well, many receive constructive or critical feedback that is very challenging. The benefit of this process is that they find themselves among a very supportive group of leaders they've come to know and with whom they have entered into a learning process. It is not unusual for groups of three or four people to sit around and talk with one another about their results, or to coach a person who is struggling for an hour or more after the workshop ends. They will have several days to let this information sink in and to integrate their feedback with all they are learning about leadership before returning to work.

On Thursday, it is time for the Development Planning workshop where the main feature is a peer coaching process. I model the process by asking a series of probing questions to a participant about an activity that they plan to do to address a development need while a third person writes everything down on a coaching worksheet. For the person working in front of the group it is often a very intense, but insightful experience. Working in groups of three, everyone then has an opportunity to develop a plan for action. The energy level is very high in this activity, and it gives participants an opportunity to improve

their coaching skills as well. Having participants work on and share their plan for action with colleagues increases their likelihood of taking action.

End-of session evaluations and surveys conducted months after the leadership institute show that 20-30% of participants find the 360° feedback to be the most valuable part of the institute. “I know I am not perfect” one respondent wrote, “so why was I getting so upset when someone pointed out the obvious?” In an online survey conducted with over 130 graduates, we found that supervisors were more likely to ask for direct feedback, clarify potentially hurtful misunderstandings, and take the speaker’s point of view before reacting to constructive feedback. Listening patiently came up again and again as a key factor. People were less likely to dread criticism and more likely to appreciate it as an opportunity to learn and improve. While 360° feedback was not the only factor in their personal transformation, it clearly was a life-changing experience for many.

Finally, the graduate survey not only provided tremendous insight on how supervisors have grown, but through numerous personal stories, how they use their interpersonal skills to make changes to get bottom-line results in quality, customer satisfaction and yes, even financial results. The 20/20 Insight GOLD report clearly shows the company that their ROI on their leadership program is very high.