

The 360 Degree Trap

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

I am a big believer in 360 Degree assessments for leaders. Reason: the tool is one of the best ways to reveal to a leader what other people think of him or her. If administered correctly, the evaluation can be insightful and form the basis of a well-focused development plan. Unfortunately, there are some traps that can cause the 360 Degree Assessment to be harmful rather than helpful. In this article, I focus on one major flaw with 360 Degree Assessments and offer some antidotes to this problem.

Most organizations use 360 as a measure of the effectiveness of leaders, and that information is directly related to compensation and advancement. This is logical because a 360 Degree Assessment represents how skilled the leader is at working with people at all levels. Isn't that what a performance measurement system is supposed to do? Actually, no. Performance measurement should focus on results and behaviors to get the results, not on how well liked a leader is with people at all levels.

The 360 Degree Assessment can result in leadership mediocrity. Once managers realize their performance will be measured with a 360 process, they quickly learn it is vital to have all subordinates like them. That means leaders will focus on being popular with the troops, which is not always the best strategy for excellent leadership.

For example, I witnessed a Business Unit Manager who took his entire team off site for a day-long celebration of their progress. A lot of money was spent, and a good time was had by all, complete with a "hand jive" group dance that pumped a lot of energy. Six months later the entire team was unemployed, including the manager. He ignored the business realities and focused on keeping employees happy until there was no business left.

Great leaders recognize that sometimes they are not going to be well liked. They always seek to be respected, but that means sometimes enduring a period where they are unpopular. As Colin Powell once said, "Being responsible sometimes means pissing people off." If the 360 Degree Assessment is directly linked to compensation

and advancement, the exercise encourages leaders to make popular decisions over doing the right thing.

I recall one instance where I was combining several manufacturing departments into a divisional structure. Most of the departments had a mandatory safety shoe rule because the employees were moving heavy materials. One department decided they would not require safety shoes because most of their operation was "light" manufacturing. I was troubled by the inconsistent policy and was trying to drive a safety shoe mandate for all departments. I met with considerable resistance from this one department.

One day an operator in that department had an incident with a cart that ran over his foot. The injury was not serious, but it could have easily been a broken foot. I called a meeting and said it was now a requirement to wear safety shoes in the department. For months after that, I was a very unpopular leader with that population. The decision was respected, and it was clearly followed, but these people were extremely unhappy. My 360 rating coming from that area was impacted that year, and it had a negative influence on my overall performance appraisal.

The remedy is to make the leadership evaluation be a holistic process that takes into account many things, one of which is a 360 Degree Assessment. There needs to be an understanding that a temporarily low score from subordinates is not necessarily a black mark. The interpretation of data needs to take into account conditions on the ground that are causing the low marks. You might think that if employees had true respect for their leader, they would rate her highly even if they were unhappy with her at the moment. If you believe that, you and I disagree on human nature.

If handled well, the 360 Degree process works extremely well. Unfortunately, many organizations do not apply the necessary caveats because they don't take the time and energy to understand the situations driving the data. Measuring human performance of managers is a very complex process, if your objectives are to encourage the right behaviors in the future and grow leadership capabilities. Do not mechanically couple the results of 360 Degree Assessments to compensation and advancement programs. It can lead to mediocre leaders.



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