



## **4 Steps to Harness 360-Feedback's Possibilities**

Effective leaders develop themselves and their team members. Since the 1990s, many leaders have leveraged the development possibilities from 360-feedback surveys, or multi-rater feedback. Like all development tools, 360-feedback surveys have their pros and cons.

A quick scan online yields articles warning readers of the “Horrible Truth of 360-Feedback Assessments” and “The Fatal Flaw with 360-Surveys”. 360-feedback surveys can promote disagreement, dissension, and discord—when implemented improperly. However, when used as a developmental tool, rather than an evaluative appraisal, 360-feedback affords individuals greater self-awareness, opportunities for deeper alignment with company goals, and insights for clear paths to professional success.

Like all employees, leaders have their own blind spots. In order to successfully manage themselves and their teams it is key to acknowledge these blind spots exist and work to minimize their effects. Leaders who develop this awareness position themselves for success by knowing what competencies they possess, how those relate to the success of the company, and how others around them—peers, direct reports, customers, etc.—perceive their day-to-day effectiveness.

### **360-Feedback's Possibilities & Pitfalls**

360-feedback provides leaders and team members with key data points taking them beyond their own hunches or assumptions about themselves. They can gain critical insights from how others validate their strengths and pinpoint their weaknesses. It informs, or alerts, recipients to traits and tendencies concealed from their view but ripe for refinement. 360-feedback helps recipients address what strengths and competencies they offer, how those strengths are perceived by others, and how closely linked one's strengths are with the goals of the company.

Because of its anonymous multi-rater process, 360-surveys add a unique richness to an individual's development opportunities by lessening the intrusion of reviewer bias. 360's anonymity empowers raters to offer unguarded feedback because they are given a voice and permission to use it. This anonymity, though, can enable ineffective responses if respondents aren't aware of the survey's goals and expectations. Without coaching and necessary time to complete the surveys, respondents can offer points of grievance without context or examples, expressing aimless criticisms of a leader.

Additionally, leaders who force 360-feedback surveys into the rhythms of their companies will find it difficult to connect the dots between company goals and how 360-feedback can help recipients contribute to those goals. Not all 360 tools are created equal, and if leaders don't take the time to shape a 360 to the core competencies of a



certain role and the overall values of a company, they'll encounter more dilemmas than developmental opportunities.

So how can leaders effectively implement 360-feedback as part of their companies' goals for development and success? Here are four steps to harness the possibilities—and avoid the pitfalls—of 360-feedback.

1. **Align to Desired Behaviors:** Before a leader receives a 360-feedback review or has a team member reviewed, it's important to evaluate empirical research addressing the skills, abilities, and competencies necessary for certain roles to help a company thrive. It's also important to consider which 360 tool is appropriate to drive desired outcomes. This combination will help leaders connect the dots between what development opportunities and strengths a 360-review reveals and what direction of development will help an individual efficiently contribute to the company's success.
2. **Use as a Developmental Coaching Tool:** Problems arise when 360-feedback is used as an evaluative instrument of performance rather than as a development tool for coaching. When 360-feedback is used to grade performance, it becomes tied to decision making that involves possible promotions, raises, etc. In this capacity, 360-feedback can be inappropriately viewed as a final assessment. Instead, leaders need to understand—and help others understand—it's a data point on the development journey. A skilled coach can deliver the results of 360-feedback to help leaders grow in awareness of their strengths, define steps for moving forward, and clarify what accountability and feedback loops look like.
3. **View It as a Component:** Leaders who use only 360-feedback reviews to assess themselves and others are akin to conductors who direct only one musician; they'll hear wonderful notes and chords, but multiple instruments are required to hear the entire song. 360-feedback reviews should be used in concert with other tools to provide a fuller, clearer picture of behavioral strengths and development opportunities. This provides leaders with a better baseline to create a more nuanced plan for learning, practice, progress, and success.
4. **Clearly Communicate Expectations:** Ensuring facilitators and those surveyed are trained to offer helpful reviews is the backbone of a successful 360-feedback discussion. Clear expectations provide a leader with the opportunity to embrace a wider company vision for a culture of development, help illuminate strengths, and highlight opportunities to grow expected competencies. This also helps prepare recipients to digest and reflect on feedback to develop a plan for professional development.

Leaders who hastily implement 360-surveys without a developmental mindset and effective coaching will likely encounter challenges. But when 360-surveys are used as a development opportunity to cultivate greater alignment between strengths and the competencies required to succeed, they bolster self-awareness and create effective development plans to move leaders—and their teams—toward success.



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