



## What the Heck *is* a 360 degree Leadership Assessment?

I hear more questions and confusion about 360s than almost any other kind of assessment tool. So being a passionate advocate of the *right* kind of 360 degree assessment, let me try and clear up some of the fog surrounding these, from a CEO's perspective.

The right kind of 360 degree leadership assessment is a developmental tool that will help leaders identify leadership areas in which they could benefit from some focus and work. Since none of us are born perfect leaders, it is virtually always helpful to know how we are doing - not from our own, often rose-tinted self assessment, but in the eyes of the people around us who see us leading every day. In order to ensure that honesty drives the result, 360 degree leadership assessments should be anonymous from the participant standpoint, and from a recipient's point of view, they should be seen as developmental and never tied to bonuses, salary increases or used in a punitive manner (i.e. to try and document a case for a termination).

360 degree leadership assessments demonstrate the message that "perception is reality." A leader can choose to be defensive and argue with the results, but since these assessments are the composite view from an individual's boss, peers and direct reports, regardless of what a leader thinks, their observers' perception of *observable leadership behavior* is the reality. But perhaps more importantly, 360 degree leadership assessments should tie to business results for a company or organization - i.e. what are the critical leadership behaviors that senior leaders (and subordinate leaders to an increasing degree as they move up) need to be strong at, if the company is to achieve its strategic business objectives? 360s should not be done to "feel good", to substitute for or to complement annual performance assessments.

There are many 360 degree leadership assessments available in the market, and most require a trained and licensed consultant to administer them. The instrument itself is critical, since many use a simple rating (Likert) scale, for participants to score the person being assessed on a number of leadership behaviors. The problem with these type of instruments is that it is very easy to "game" the questionnaire. If an observer just had a difficult interaction with the leader being assessed, it is very easy to just provide low scores, whether intentionally or subconsciously. For this reason, the best 360 instruments use a forced-choice question format, which takes the "gaming" out of the process. The observer has no idea which behaviors their answers go to, and they aren't entering scores in any case, so the accuracy of the assessment is increased as well.

The last element of successful 360 degree leadership assessment is taking action. There is no point in doing 360s if there isn't a clear path to taking action to improve one or two behaviors that could use some work. The best instruments provide documentation that walks leaders through a process of identifying behaviors they feel they should work on, and then sharing their

plans with their observers, so there is some accountability to actually improve. The best side benefit of good 360 processes is to make discussions about leadership skills “safe”, i.e. since none of us is a perfect leader, we can all improve. With the feedback from my observers and the development of a personal action plan, I can also solicit help, and at the same time, if any of my observers see me sliding backwards, they can remind me of the commitment I made. Think of the power of an organization where talking about leadership skills isn’t done only behind closed doors and in whispers, but is part of a healthy dialogue about how leaders can be even better, to achieve even better business results. Where junior leaders clearly understand the behaviors that they will have to work on, in order to be considered for greater responsibility and to be part of the company’s succession plan.

The instrument I have used in all three public companies I led (and which I am now licensed to administer) is from a Portland, ME company called MRG. It is simply the best 360 instrument I have ever found, and below I have attached a link to their website. I have also included a link to an excellent whitepaper they have produced, that discusses why 360 degree leadership assessment **must** connect to business results and the bottom line.

When you are ready to identify the critical leadership behaviors that are required to achieve your business objectives, consider a good 360 degree leadership assessment process as the path to follow to develop them.

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