Training &
Development

How to Conduct a Self-Directed 360

KATE LUDEMAN, PhD

Not so long ago in employee development, state-of-the-art meant performance feedback completed by a single person, a supervisor. Inevitably, the feedback was a one-sided view of the employee's performance. Then, 360 assessment made a positive move away from that one-dimensional perspective. Now, the standard 360 solicits feedback from colleagues above, below, and around an employee to provide observations of his or her performance in several skill and behavioral categories—typically in a report with numeric ratings or compilations of quotes that can be delivered online by an internal HR consultant or by an outside consultant. Although that kind of 360 exposes employees to a broader range of perceptions, the confidentiality of the feedback means that details aren't included in the report. Without real-time explanations and clarifications, perceptions are often misunderstood or ignored.

A new self-directed 360 assessment takes the benefits of the standard 360 approach further by providing a process for getting feedback face-to-face directly from people who work closely with an employee. Bypassing such intermediaries as external consultants and surveys gives an employee the opportunity to ask questions, listen, and get clarification on the feedback.

The self-directed 360 also differs in that it's as likely to be set in motion by an employee as by the employer. It also personalizes the categories of feedback. The self-directed 360 seeks information on an employee's specific role and goals, and on the company's needs at the time of the assessment. A CEO can request feedback about his or her visioning abilities; a middle manager with multiple direct reports can focus on time management skills.

STEP THIS WAY

The 360 is full-circle evaluation involving self-evaluation and feedback from other people about one's performance in predetermined competencies.

STEP 1: COMMIT TO HEARING THE TRUTH

Any assessment should ultimately be about feedback and learning. You can use the self-directed 360 to enrich your company's existing 360 process or as a way to get feedback if your company doesn't use 360.

The feedback recipient needs a crystallized vision of his or her objectives, the courage to ask for the truth, and the commitment to use the results fully to increase effectiveness. Listening to an accounting of our shortcomings isn't fun, and recognizing the benefits requires being undefensive. What one learns from comparing a self-assessment with the observations of others (even when the observations are hastily delivered criticism, brutal honesty, or clumsy praise) is information for making the changes that will serve one well. That is the gift of any 360. It reflects our decisions and behaviors and provides us with a clear view of what we do most effectively and what we most need to change. The additional gift of self-directed 360 is that it lets us receive feedback from the sources rather than secondhand, or filtered through ratings or a consultant's perceptions of what was said.

STEP 2: CONDUCT THE SELF-ASSESSMENT

Planning a self-directed 360 requires identifying objectives and conducting a self-assessment. Ask what you want to learn and experience as a result of the assessment. Then, link those objectives to your self-assessment and your sense of the areas in which you shine and in which you experience difficulty. It's human to vacillate between being overly self-critical and denial of or whitewashing unflattering feedback. High achievers tend to be too critical of themselves. They can expend tremendous energy perfecting areas that are already good enough. With denial, real development areas that you should focus on but don't enjoy may remain unimproved—thus, short-changing the weakest areas that truly need attention.

To begin a self-assessment, list areas that need development. Facing weaknesses head-on sends a message to the feedback providers that you're open to hearing and dis-

cussing criticism. Your matter-of-fact approach will give the members of your feedback circle the permission to speak freely, resulting in a significant yield of useful feedback.

Next list your strengths. That will help determine whether your assessment is realistic or you've veered into self-criticism or denial. The list below shows typical competency areas included in a self-directed 360. You will use the same items in the self-assessment and interviews with feedback providers:

- leadership
- customer focus
- business acumen
- results focus
- problem solving
- innovation
- vision and strategy
- risk taking
- time management
- organization
- courage and integrity
- peer collaboration
- communications
- teamwork
- empowerment
- delegation and prioritizing
- staffing
- coaching and development

Choose relevant areas for your job from the competencies above and add job-specific items. For instance, two sales managers, despite nearly identical positions, may identify a different focus depending on the status of their organization. Or at a company that's growing 40 percent a year, managers might focus on hiring and training sales representatives. At a company that's retrenching in a declining market, managers might focus on customer service and business management.

STEP 3: PLAN THE INTERVIEWS

Planning involves establishing performance categories and identifying who will be in your feedback circle.

With the self-assessment as your guide, you will establish performance categories for the interviews. That involves reviewing the categories on which you rated your perform-

ance in your self-assessment and being prepared to ask you colleagues about their perceptions of your skills, competence, and performance in those areas.

Next, you identify the most helpful sources for feedback. Because the 360 takes its name from the idea that the full circle of people with whom you work supply your feedback, be certain to include your manager, managers in other departments with whom you work closely, your peers in your unit, and other peers you work with. If you are a manager, include all of your direct reports and high potentials the next level down. I suggest limiting your 360 circle to six or eight people if you're in an individual contributor role and to 15 to 20 people if you're a manager.

STEP 4: PREPARE FOR THE FEEDBACK

In this step, you prepare yourself mentally and emotionally to receive feedback. Everyone handles this differently, and you're the expert on your responses. You know when and why you become defensive, so you're in the best position to prepare yourself to listen openly. People who perform the self-assessment truthfully and candidly are typically better prepared when it comes to receiving feedback from others. And you're unlikely to be surprised by other people's feedback, whether affirming or critical, if your self-assessment is thorough and honest.

You can prepare to handle feedback gracefully by remembering that the questions are your questions. Once you have the answers, they're like broccoli and liver: Like them or not, they're good for you and will help you grow. Hearing tough feedback makes you bigger; learning from it makes you stronger.

A hint about this step: It's important that you're able to reassure your 360 circle of your ability to respond positively to honest feedback. If you request genuine feedback and then become argumentative, you're unlikely to receive the kind of feedback you need.

Below are some examples similar to actual negative comments I've seen in 360s that are likely to trigger defensiveness. Imagine they're being said about you. Do they make you defensive or make your face flush? Try to remember that your responses when you request and receive feedback serve as red flags that you're at a critical decision point—to either shut down or stay open and learn.

- "If she thinks you can help her career, she'll do whatever she can to make your job go well—whether you're a client, boss, or customer. But if you're not important enough, she ignores you."

- "He seems focused on finding somebody to blame, not on figuring out what the problem is and how to fix it. It's

always 'Who messed up?' instead of 'How can we make things work here?"

- "She's unwilling to admit her mistakes. She blames us and forgets that we were often following her directions."

- "As someone who represents the company, he just doesn't have the polish and sophistication. He's sloppy and uncultured, and he mumbles and slumps in his seat at meetings. He thinks his down-to-earth ways make him genuine, but people tend to be embarrassed."

- "She tells people things she shouldn't. She's open, so it's a strength. But it's inappropriate. By making us feel 'in' because of her confidences, she's simultaneously betraying someone else. People around here agree she's nice but doesn't know when to keep her mouth shut. People can't trust her."

- "He's smart as a whip, and that's the problem, in some ways, because his ideas are always 'right' even if they're not always right. Because he's so often right, he isn't open to our ideas and just rolls right over us in planning sessions. I feel disrespected because of it."

- "Since the day she arrived, there was buzz about how she was going to turn things around, but most of what I've seen is big ideas and no follow-through. Even the little things: You're going to meet over lunch and… at the last minute she can't do it, too busy. I'm not the only one who feels you can't count on her."

STEP 5: CONDUCT THE INTERVIEWS

Several do's and don'ts can help make the most of the 360 interviews.

- **Don't** argue points with the feedback providers. Feedback is perceptual. Because it's based on your colleagues' actual experiences with you and their interpretation of those experiences, there are no wrongs or rights. In the same situation, you can be perceived as a problem to one person and a solution to another. A colleague could view you as aggressive and you think you're straightforward and direct. Or someone could view you as argumentative while another person could see you as courageous. Differences in perspective, incongruities, and outright conflicts don't take away from feedback's usefulness. They just mean that you'll have to study the feedback to discover underlying patterns and the changes you need to make. It's unlikely everyone will agree on the changes you should make.

- **Don't** justify your actions as a response to critical feed-

back. Justifications are dressed-up arguments, excuses, or explanations for why you did something that didn't work. The intent, conscious or not, is to get other people to agree with you once they hear your reasoning. That communicates that you're less interested in hearing and understanding their perspectives and more interested in expressing your own. Why you did something is irrelevant to your purpose in the 360—to learn what people think of you, why they think of you that way, and how you can make the necessary changes to improve your performance.

- **Do** seek clarification about people's comments, but don't use trying to understand as a pretext to imply that the feedback makes no sense. Before asking a question, be certain you're really curious and are seeking more information.

- **Do** ask for suggestions, advice, and assistance in working on the issues identified in the 360. For example, if a colleague observes that you don't "pull your weight" in meetings, ask him or her to suggest specific ways you could do that. And make sure you understand precisely what "pull your weight" means to that person. Ask for an example, something the person has observed. Once you understand, brainstorm together ways to be more effective until you hit upon one both of you agree on.

- **Do** find something to genuinely appreciate about the feedback—such as taking the time to do the interview,

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someone's courage to be frank, or a particular comment. Such appreciation builds relationships and abates defensive feelings.

STEP 6: ANALYZE THE FEEDBACK

Analyze the feedback in the way that yields the richest possible information. Then create and act on your development plan. The feedback will likely contain mixed comments about your strengths and need for improvement. Review the feedback when you feel you can be open to it.

As you review the feedback comments, place each one in one of these categories: strengths, areas needing improvement, or areas needing clarification. If a comment has both positive and negative aspects, place it into each appropriate

category.

Once you've placed the feedback in the appropriate categories, create a fourth category: trends. Look in the first three groupings to see whether comments from two or more of your feedback circle are similar. if so, note them under trends. Obviously, those are the areas you'll want to pay close attention to because they're manifesting themselves in multiple relationships or multiple instances.

In addition, look at the feedback in terms of the various relationships. For example, do you tend to meet deadlines with business partners and managers but not with your staff?

The final stage involves creating your development plan. Here's a sample of the development plan that I use with clients. There's a concrete and definitive quality to a written analysis. The act of writing our intentions and seeing them in black and white makes them more real and the changes more likely to become a reality.

In your development plan, repeat the following information as many times as necessary for the areas of improvement you intend to focus on:

STEP 7: DESCRIBE A KEY AREA YOU PLAN TO CHANGE OR MODIFY

- Optimal outcome
- Specific steps I will take
- Support and other resources I will need

Seeking genuine feedback signals a true openness to learning and improvement. Carefully examining and fully integrating that feedback speaks volumes. Seeking and using feedback, even when it's difficult to accept, says visibly that you're committed to achieving excellence and your greatest potential. And that says that you're rare, indeed, with limitless possibilities.

Contact info@worthethic.com or refer to www.worthethic.com for more information.

Kate, a widely recognized executive coach, speaker and author, founded Worth Ethic Corporation in 1988. Her BS in engineering and PhD in psychology give her a unique approach when working with analytical, data-oriented executives, who want to expand their emotional intelligence and create company cultures where people perform at their peak. Kate has worked with over 1,000 senior executives in a wide range of industries. She has coached executives globally on all major continents.

Previously, she was vice president of human resources for a high-tech Silicon Valley company. Her books include *The Worth Ethic*, *Earn What You're Worth*, *The Corporate Mystic* (now in its 11th printing)..

Worth Ethic
CORPORATION

309 W. Main, Suite 116
Round Rock, TX 78664
(512) 493-2300 • info@worthethic.com
www.worthethic.com