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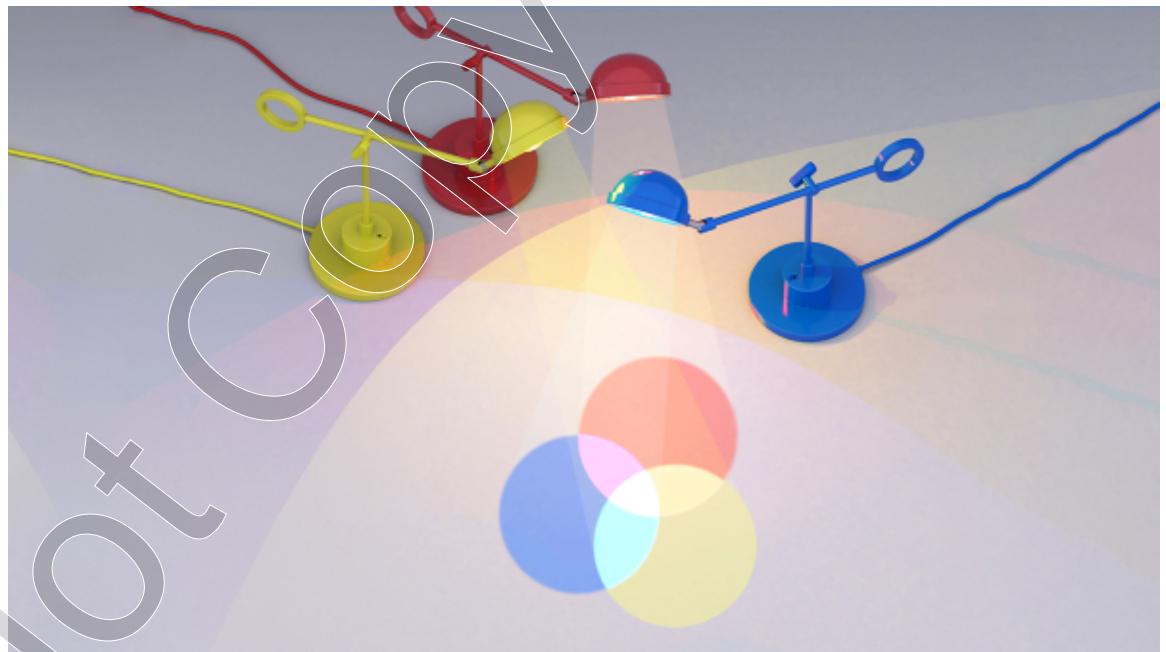
Getting the Most Out of 360-Degree Reviews

by John Behr

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Online and interview-based 360-degree reviews can be extremely valuable tools. They bring together insights from a range of coworkers, often illuminate an executive's blind spots, and give colleagues a way to weigh in on and support the individual's development.

But these tools are only effective if the feedback is kept confidential, respondents are encouraged to be candid, and everyone is transparent about the purpose behind the 360. Whether you use an online survey or in-depth interviews conducted by an outside coach, these areas require special attention. Here's why each is important.

Confidentiality

Coworkers can be more honest and direct knowing that their comments won't be attributable to them, but many may worry that their responses won't be kept confidential. With online surveys, choosing a credible vendor can reassure subjects and respondents that information will not be accessible to anyone internally. If this is the first time that the company is using the survey, HR leaders need to make it clear how confidentiality is ensured and guarded.

When 360s are done through in-depth interviews, the coach needs to assure respondents beforehand that what they say will not be relayed to the subject. When I conduct these types of interviews, I typically explain that I only give aggregate feedback to the subject and never connect a respondent's name to a comment they made. In fact, I take care in making sure none of the feedback is attributable. Sometimes it helps to reassure respondents that I'm experienced in dealing with 360 subjects who try — sometimes with great subtlety — to find out which respondent said what.

Candor

When using online survey vendors, HR needs to make sure the instructions cover how important it is for respondents to be candid and not worry about wounding subjects' self-esteem. The expectation should be that people are direct and open while ensuring their comments are productive. It's rare for respondents to be overly critical or inappropriate in their remarks since comments of those nature can often be attributable to specific people.

With interview-based 360s, coaches should also emphasize [the need for candor](#). In my interviews, I point out that candid feedback is the only way to really help the company and the individual. And I assure respondents that I convey feedback to subjects in a way that helps them understand and digest it without feeling attacked or devalued.

It's also worth noting that people are generally tougher than we assume — and that [even inaccurate perceptions can be useful](#) if they cause subjects to take a new look at their behaviors. Most of us can probably remember an occasion when we were wrongly characterized by someone, and yet, paradoxically, it led to valuable self-reflection.

Transparency

When rolling out a 360, HR and the person's manager should be transparent with the coach, the subject, and the respondents about the purpose of the 360. Is it for general development purposes (say, to establish a baseline for coaching)? Is there a specific performance issue that's of concern? If the subject's job is at stake, both the subject and the coach should be made aware of it.

Keeping the real objectives from the subject, respondents, and a coach who may be involved can be counter-productive. If coaches doing the interviewing don't know what's at stake, for example, they may not be able to zero in on crucial performance areas or push subjects to understand the severity of their situation.

I've seen lack of transparency over the purpose of 360s happen more than once. In one instance, I was involved in conducting a set of 360 interviews for a group of executives at a manufacturing company. The subjects were told that the 360 was being used to help them learn more about how they were perceived by their colleagues and get coaching to build on their strengths and address any limitations. But while the reviews were being conducted, two senior positions opened up and senior leaders decided to use the 360s to identify the best candidates for promotion from among the group being reviewed. When the 360s were completed and the new purpose finally came to light, the subjects felt betrayed, and the senior leaders and HR had to work hard to regain their trust. I also had some explaining to do when it came to providing feedback to the subjects. Every one of them challenged me as to whether I had known ahead of time how the 360s would be used. For subjects and respondents, the shift in purpose cast a cloud over the whole process, undermining the perception of how valid of the feedback really was.

Using 360s in this way — to make personnel decisions and, intentionally or not, misleading participants about the purpose — opens the company to legal issues and complaints.

In addition to being transparent from the start, the organization can further reduce the potential for complaints by ensuring that the process is designed to provide accurate descriptions of how individuals are perceived by the different groups they interact with. In general, risks can be minimized by selecting a representative group of respondents, making sure that records are kept safe, and using trained professionals to provide feedback.

When conducting online 360s, there are two additional issues to consider.

Customization

Many online 360s can be customized. The main reason to do so is to reflect the company's language and its vision, mission, and valued competencies. Special circumstances may also require customized surveys — for example, if the organization has merged with another company, there may be questions concerning how the executive relates to executives within the new entity. If having an online survey customized to suit the organization or individual is important, HR will need to choose the right vendor. Many offer limited or no customization — or offer it at an extra cost. Others will build survey questions from scratch.

While customization is always beneficial, companies do have to consider the cost. Changing any element of an online survey, such as merging two of the survey's standard competencies into one or splitting one standard competency into two, is not as simple as it seems. Any altered competencies will necessitate additional steps so that responses can be reliably compared to the survey's established norms.

Follow up

Some online survey programs simply produce a summary report but 360s should never be delivered in a vacuum. **Without context and support**, the subject may not be able to **make use of the feedback**

and, therefore, question the value of the process. Further, when respondents don't see anything change as a result of their participation in the survey, future respondents may regard the surveys as a waste of time, leading them to resist filling them out or to give only perfunctory responses. At a minimum, the subject should have a conversation with someone who is skilled in the interpretation of the results and can help them develop an action plan.

No assessment process is perfect, but when 360s are thoughtfully implemented, they provide valuable insights and a reliable baseline for leadership development, delivering feedback to executives that's otherwise hard to come by.

John Behr is an executive coach who has worked with Fortune 500 companies in the U.S. and companies in Europe, India, China, Japan, and Southeast Asia. He has completed over 3,000 executive assessments of new hires and candidates for promotion. Find him at www.johnbehrgroup.com.
