How to Go 360° and Not Wind Up in the Same Place

Bertram C. Edelstein, Ph.D. and Peggy Hanley, M.B.A.

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To derive the full value from 360° workplace feedback, corporations must possess a clear understanding of this tool, as well as the problems it can and cannot solve. This article deepens understanding of 360° feedback and distinguishes between its use for assessment versus development. It combines the results of studies analyzing the impact of an executive development program utilizing 360° workplace feedback, with the experience gained by using 360° feedback in executive coaching over the past fifteen years. The article concludes that purveyors of 360° instruments must refrain from proffering 360° feedback as a panacea for what ails corporate America.

The Conceptual Underpinnings Of 360° Feedback

A Glimpse into the Future through Virtual Reality

I have often wondered about the contribution Virtual Reality Technology could make to people’s efforts to stop smoking cigarettes. What would be the effect if a smoker was connected to a Virtual Reality device capable of recreating an in-the-bones, live experience of emphysema—a disease which may lie far off in the future of the young smoker? Would the smoker be so impacted today by the experience that the mere thought of it would make smoking impossible? The power of this application of Virtual Reality resides in its ability to shift almost certain future consequences into the present. In so doing, the smoker would be confronted with future consequences at a point in time where changes in smoking behavior may yield a different result.

In much the same way, 360° workplace feedback presents executives with information today they would otherwise not be made aware of until some point in the future. Typically, this would occur when the executive’s problematic management behavior has reached a critical mass and the company could no longer afford to shield the executive from his or her impact. Thus, 360° workplace feedback is intended to convey to the executive the future impact of her current management behavior in order to provide an opportunity for development before problems become major issues. Feedback from 360° appraisals side-steps and over-rides the organization’s tendency to keep important performance related feedback from the executive—particularly as it pertains to the impact his or her management behavior has on the organization. Argyris describes the organization’s automatic response to threatening feedback as covering up, being civilized, or easing into the problem. He suggests that frequently people in organizations wait too long before communicating feedback about a problem. When information about a problem is conveyed, the recipient of the feedback then responds to the negative content and feels the other person is trying to hurt him. Alternatively, if people subtly try to convey a problem, the message may be unclear and its ambiguity perceived as a game of sorts, not to be discussed. In this same article, Argyris suggests that, as is the case with all face-saving games, these types of games are undiscussable and their undiscussability is undiscussable.

Holding Up the Mirror (Confronting Organizational Perceptions)

Companies often have distortion-packed, convoluted performance feedback mechanisms. A well-designed process of 360° feedback essentially circumnavigates these mechanisms. It provides feedback regarding the organization’s current experience with an executive, and the feedback is experienced by the executive today. This effectively short circuits the organization’s tendency to not provide executives with honest feedback until some future point when the company can no longer afford to keep the feedback from them, when it is often too late to do anything about it. The workplace feedback from a 360° process synthetically provides the long-lost feedback loop executives need to be able to adjust their management behavior, learn, and grow.

The feedback from a 360° appraisal is obtained by going out into the organization and soliciting input (usually through an independent third-party to ensure anonymity). This process conveys feedback to the executive that will eventually be brought to the executive’s attention, but it happens sooner than it would otherwise, and hopefully soon enough that there is enough time to modify management behavior and perceptions.

Essentially, 360° feedback contravenes the natural organizational process of spinning and managing information about an executive’s performance as she moves.
up the organization ladder. Only when an issue or problem becomes acute is it surfaced and brought to the executive's attention. By then it is too late; final judgments about the executive’s performance and value to the company have been made – the verdict is in.

Alternatively, 360° feedback can also provide clarity on the executive’s strengths (i.e., areas of conscious or unconscious competence). These valued behaviors may be noticed but not commented upon in the normal course of work, and the 360° feedback process can point out what she has gotten better at, and what she needs to keep doing.

The truth is that discussions about executive performance and impact do go on. Out of the executive's earshot, conversations are taking place and an organizational opinion about the executive’s value and impact is being formed. Yet often executives possess only a vague sense of the impact of what they are doing, both right and wrong, and are often short on specifics about what needs to be done to improve or correct problems.

Management Behavior Risk Appraisal

Executives are accustomed to yearly physicals. This 360° head-to-toe review of the body generates feedback concerning key bio-markers including cholesterol, blood pressure, PSA count, and heart rate. The results reflect the executive’s current physical state and provide the point of departure for improving physical health. Most importantly, the power of these so-called Health Risk Appraisals lies in the fact that they make executives aware of problems before they become acute and at a time when the executive’s behavior can alter the course of the disease process and its outcome.

Feedback from a workplace 360° process is similar. It is a 360° review of the executive’s management and leadership behavior and impact in the workplace. The 360° review generates feedback concerning key work-markers, including the ability to develop a team, leverage oneself through others, deal with performance problems, handle ambiguity, etc. The results of this assessment provide the point of departure for improving executive effectiveness. If done early enough, this “Work-Risk Appraisal” makes executives aware of the impact of their management behavior at a point in time when the verdict has not been decided and when changes in executives’ management behavior can alter the outcome.

Stated another way, 360° workplace feedback makes executives aware of their reflexive management behaviors or their default settings. Left to their own devices, without a conscious override, and particularly under stress, 360° workplace feedback describes how executives typically respond to people and situations and reveal what is most characteristic about the executive. Furthermore, they yield some of the most valid information about executive behavior since the information is empirically derived and collected from a cross-section of observers and consumers of the executive’s management behavior.

The feedback data generated by 360° surveys has commonly been used in the context of executive development. More recently, 360° feedback data are being used for performance appraisal. However, the honesty of the raters is less reliable than when used solely for development. Dalton suggests that “multi rater feedback is best used for developmental purposes and should be a confidential and private process.” McCauley further suggests that “to ensure honest ratings, raters need to feel their ratings are anonymous, the data will be shared confidentially and with the person being assessed. Likewise, confidentiality is an important prerequisite for creating the safe environment a person needs for hearing and accepting the data.”

Done once, the 360° process can guide adjustments and reinforce strengths. To be useful over a career, individuals need repeated feedback and many firms resurvey every two to three years. Progress can thus be measured and backsliding avoided.

Differentiating Between Assessment and Development

Point of Departure Not to Be Confused with the Destination

As organizational psychologists and organization development practitioners, we have created a panoply of models and assessment inventories. There are more management grids than we know what to do with and almost as many assessment instruments as mutual funds. Less well developed are technologies which incorporate and utilize assessment as the starting point for executive development.

All too often executive assessment is an end in itself. Executives are assessed and then left to their own devices to figure out what to do next. Or, when a development plan is articulated, there is little support in implementing it, and follow-up is usually non-existent. Knowing how difficult it is to modify management or any other kind of behavior, this is at best naïve, and at worst, irresponsible. What is needed is a development process which takes into account how executives learn and which guides executives as they begin to come to grips with the assessment and deal with the inevitable personal and organizational resistance to change.
Executive Coaching and 360° Feedback  
— The Vehicle for Development

Once upon a time, only professional athletes had coaches. It has always been expected that athletes needed and benefited from coaching. For an executive to ask for help, however, was tantamount to admitting weakness and almost certain to be accompanied by derision and stigmatization. Today, not only is it respectable to have a coach, it is also a status symbol. While coaching has become ubiquitous of late, the rigor of such a relationship varies widely. Some coaches focus on work life balance, spiritual development, or time management and prioritization.

Executive coaching did for executive development in the 90’s what stress management did for anxiety in the 80’s. By reframing the issue it has become acceptable to ask for and accept help. While most people felt uncomfortable admitting to feeling anxious (“that’s neurotic”), they were willing to talk about feeling stressed (“it’s normal, everyone feels this way!”). Feeling stressed-out was worn like a badge of courage by those who equated exhaustion and the organization’s extraction of a pound of flesh with productivity and effectiveness.

Indeed this has been a positive development because while the quality control and essence of coaching may be problematic, it is within the context of an organizationally supported coaching relationship that the development power of 360° feedback is realized. The coaching process leverages a 360° survey (essentially a diagnostic tool) into a developmental experience. Within a coaching relationship, 360° workplace feedback is the point of departure on a journey whose goal is increased executive capacity and an expanded repertoire of management behaviors. It is through the coaching relationship that the executive comes to grips with the workplace feedback, understands when and where reflexes are and are not appropriate to the task at hand, and defines a plan which increases present-day effectiveness and prepares the executive to take his/her game to the next level.

For the past twelve years, we have been conducting executive coaching via a psychologically-based model, equally grounded in the requirements of the workplace, that incorporates 360° workplace feedback. We have now studied the impact of our executive coaching model on two large client systems and have experience with over 2,000 participants. The results of the initial study were previously reported and we later completed a second study with the top executives from one of the five largest managed health care companies in the United States. Both our studies indicate there are several key dimensions and active agents which, when present, make executive coaching and 360° workplace feedback effective. These are: the relationship, the feedback, and the follow-through.

The Relationship

The essence of executive coaching and development is the relationship between executive and coach. This is so obvious that it is easy to overlook its importance. However, in many supposedly “coaching/developmental” relationships the parameters of the coaching relationship are not spelled out. Is the coach working for the executive? Is the coach working for the executive’s boss? Or, is the coach working for the company? If, at the outset, these are not specified, the executive coaching process is likely to yield a disappointing result. When the coach and the executive are jointly responsible to the organization for fostering development and maintaining accountability for follow through, the relationship is grounded in jointly shared objectives.

Equally obvious is that it is a one-to-one relationship. In fact, this is the most distinguishing characteristic of executive coaching. Moreover, once having accepted the one-to-one model as legitimate and suitable for executive development, the executive coach must recognize and bring to bear different skills than those required by platform speakers or classroom trainers. The executive coaching relationship has therapeutic/counseling overtones and it is incumbent upon the coach to understand and appreciate the “psychological” issues of transference/counter-transference, psychological defenses and confidentiality, among others. The executive coach must be able to deal with these issues during the coaching process. Maybe most important of all is the ability to form a relationship and an alliance with the executive. The relationship is the vehicle in which and through which executive coaching occurs. The coach must be skilled at discerning when to confront the executive’s resistance and knowledgeable about the level of therapeutic support needed to encourage forward movement despite setbacks.

While interpersonal fit between the coach and executive is important, coaches with some clinical background have the ability to create enough neutrality for the executive to feel comfortable. As noted by Schein there is a balance needed between whether to be an expert, a good diagnostician, or a therapist. The purpose of coaching is rarely to give direction; rather, it is to aid the executive in reflecting on and altering her behavior.
Understanding the Executive within a Larger Personal and Business Context

Our experience teaches that coach and executive must feel they are working side-by-side and share the same ultimate objective: helping the executive increase capacity and be effective in a wider range of business situations. Thach and Heinselman suggest that 80% of leadership development occurs on the job. Essential to this occurring is the executive’s belief that the coach understands the personal and business world in which he or she operates. This promotes the development of a working alliance and builds trust.

For example, John is the CEO of a high technology start-up. He formed the company and took it public. After a long career in a multi-national company as a senior executive, he was finally at the helm. John retained a coach after complaints that he was letting his Senior Vice Presidents run amok, and was failing to hold them accountable for their territorial behavior. Only upon exploring his reticence to take a tough stand with his staff did key information emerge.

Shortly after the IPO, a large order was lost, which significantly impacted first quarter earnings. John was castigated by several large investors and personally devastated at the consequences of this loss, which was mainly outside of his control. His ethics were questioned and the publicity was exquisitely painful to John who was more familiar with the less public role experienced in his former firm. Depressed about this turn of events, John had stopped intervening with his top team thereafter, since he doubted his own judgment and feared once again leading the company astray. Working through these feelings led to his getting astride the CEO horse again and forcing himself to tackle the start-up’s problems and develop his team and managers.

Understanding the executive as a person promotes and cultivates the coaching relationship. We have found that a review of the executive’s family of origin and work history fosters the development of the alliance and, at the same time, helps the executive gain an appreciation for the antecedents of reflexive management behavior. This framework of understanding lays important groundwork and pays dividends in the form of less defensiveness and greater ownership of the 360° feedback. It also increases trust since the executive feels that the coach really understands what the executive is up against. We are careful to explain both the reason for the family history and that the focus of the coaching intervention will be on the current business and personal reality. Only to the extent that past history impacts current behavior, will the family background be pertinent.

For example, Victoria, a staff vice president in a Fortune 100 company, described her “only child” experience as a very lonely existence. Her parents were much older and her after school activities consisted of exploring the family’s large ranch on horseback. Her 360° feedback revealed that she did not seem to enter into discussions readily with the CEO and other senior executives, and that “she seems to stand outside the group.” Victoria was struck with the realization, “I never learned to join a group. I’ve always been rewarded for independence and now at this level I have to be part of the team. I don’t know the rules of the game.”

We ask about family of origin matters to identify what the executive learned to do to get his/her needs met, what behaviors were learned from key role models, and in what ways the executive may be over or under compensating for things he/she did or did not get in the past. Kaplan suggests that executives find new learnings in giving their family history. Re-telling personal history allows for reflection and a new understanding of subconscious motives playing out in the workplace. Questions concerning work history assess the portfolio of the executive’s experience, the types of corporate cultures worked in, where the executive has been most/least effective, what good and bad habits the executive has learned from others along the way, particularly during the initial, most formative years of the executive’s career.

The coach’s understanding of the executive’s and the company’s business objectives, and the ability to frame the executive’s coaching experience as increasing the executive’s capability of meeting these objectives, is of central importance. If not, executive coaching is viewed as not supporting the company’s core business objectives and, at its worst, executive coaching is viewed as “charm school.” Thus, the ideal executive coach possesses business, organization development, and psychological knowledge and skills.

The Feedback

We have found that the type and quality of the 360° feedback directly impacts the outcome of the executive coaching process. Numbers alone, which attempt to quantify executive impact and performance, do not generate sufficient affect necessary to fuel the management behavior change process. Numbers are too easily intellectualized, rationalized and repressed. Thus, those 360 feedback processes that are primarily quantitative in nature do not generate a compelling cause for action.

In the absence of a compelling need to change, executives and corporations alike keep doing what has seemingly worked so well for them in the past. Only when executives are convinced that the accomplishment of
important goals is jeopardized by current management behavior, will they consider modifying how they conduct business and embark on the very difficult process of management behavior change.

We have found that quantitatively-based 360° feedback is suited for assessment of executive performance, while narrative-based 360° feedback is suited for executive development. Quantitative feedback by itself does not generate enough cognitive dissonance, the gap between how the executive views himself or herself and how others view the executive. Dissonance is the necessary precursor to change.

In our work we have the executive identify twenty-five respondents for the 360° survey. We also suggest the boss review the list and suggest additions or deletions. This ensures key “critics” or major influencers are asked for input. The high number of respondents creates a drum beat of narrative comments, which is intentionally hard to ignore, whether welcome or painful. Consistent repeated comments about the same behavior (e.g., micromanagement with specific descriptors of how and when the executive engages in this) focus attention and create a double bind when she starts to engage in the same behavior again.

Our research has shown that motivation for change is one of the most important variables in determining a successful coaching outcome. In some cases, executives come to coaching with some degree of readiness to learn. In other cases, the narrative-based 360° feedback grabs the executive, creates the requisite dissonance, and drives the change/development process. Not all executives know what they are signed on for at the start. But it is hard to ignore powerful 360° feedback, and the coach’s persistent presence. Once the 360° report and the coach’s help in interpreting the data occur, many skeptics or those who just weren’t sure of the value they would get from the coaching process, become engaged. Our attention to business results and linkage of executive behavior and business outcomes also creates motivation. In the absence of motivation and a cause for action, executives will go through the motions of coaching to satisfy the company, but will lack motivation to learn and grow.

For example, a brilliant, young principal research engineer was his company’s major asset in the design of new technology. His flaw was the lack of concern over cycle time in an industry where weeks determined market success as prices were eroding by the day. While forced into a 360° coaching process by the CEO, Chris bemoaned the firm’s demands for bringing his concepts to market more rapidly and repeatedly referenced his previous employer’s support of “knowledge for knowledge sake.” Chris cancelled or failed to appear for scheduled meetings with the coach. After consulting with the Human Resource Vice President, Chris was deemed a “drop out” and the company gave him six months to produce or get out.

The Voices of Coworkers:
The Power of Narrative Feedback
What makes narrative feedback so compelling? We have learned that it is this feedback’s ability to paint a vivid image of the executive’s impact in the workplace. An analog is the difference between learning that your cholesterol level is 350 versus seeing a color picture of a partially occluded coronary artery or experiencing angina. The same holds true with 360° narrative feedback pertaining to management behavior. Which do you think would be more impactful for the executive to hear: (a) the executive obtained a 2.5 out of 5 on a scale measuring “Delegation” versus (b) the executive learning from several narrative comments that people think he does not trust others and keeps important, high profile projects to himself? The latter not only generates the “cause for action,” but inherent in the feedback is the seeds of the development plan. It is easier to define “next steps” from the narrative remarks, while the quantitative feedback does not readily show the way.

The Written Plan
There is a strong positive correlation between the executive’s generation of a written development plan and successful outcome to the executive coaching. Writing a development plan takes time and thought and signals motivation and intent to do something with the feedback. Essentially, the process of generating the development plan increases the executive’s motivation to change.

We have found it is useful to provide executives with examples of real development plans. Examples may be drawn from different industries and represent different styles and approaches to constructing such a plan. Some of the development plans have a quantitative feel and are produced on spreadsheets, while others are narrative with the executive putting into words the main messages derived from the workplace feedback and what the executive intends to do about it in both her personal and work life. Whether quantitative or narrative it is important that the development plan contain dates/milestones for completion.

Informing the Supervisor/Staff Group
Most often the executive cannot implement the plan by himself. The executive’s management behavior is continually being shaped by the complex systems in which he operates (e.g., corporate culture, incentive systems, organization communication and structure, etc.). The more components of the system that can be
brought into play and made to support the executive’s development plan, the greater the likelihood for a positive outcome.

Gaining the buy-in and support of the executive’s supervisor is key. If the supervisor understands and knows what he needs to do in order to support the development plan, it increases the probability the plan will be put into practice.

For example, Phil, a Regional Vice President in Sales and Marketing, was a “fair haired boy.” At 32, he conquered many hurdles and as he described to his coach, “I just did what came naturally. It was never hard until I took this job.” A gifted athlete, his prowess on the greens was legendary. The CEO routinely asked for his presence at charity golf events, inviting him to join the CEO’s foursome. But passion and vision were absent from his repertoire and their absence was noticed by employees. “He is on fire with clients but not with us.” In a three-way meeting with his boss, the regional president, he finally got the message. “You’ve disappointed me. I thought you could do better. Your team notices you’re only going through the motions and that impacts their morale.” After this meeting, Phil commented to his coach, “No one has ever said they were disappointed in me! I was always the star. What a wake-up call. I can’t hide out anymore.”

Additionally, we have found that sharing the development plan with the executive’s staff group is also important. Surveying the participant’s staff group as part of the 360° feedback process raises expectations, and the staff group is naturally looking to see or experience something different. A meeting wherein the executive communicates what was heard and what the executive plans to do about it, closes the loop and enlists the staff group’s support in implementing the development plan. This is consistent with our efforts to make the feedback part of the public domain so the coaching participant and his colleagues can deal with it.

**The Follow-Through**

Modifying one’s golf swing is no mean feat. Modifying management behavior is equally as difficult, if not more so. In sports, participants receive immediate performance feedback. In the work world, the opposite is true. The combination of people withholding their true opinions of the executive’s performance and the fact that the outcome of decisions is typically not known for a long time, makes it hard to know what is and is not working and what modifications in management behavior would yield a better result. Most 360° assessments end with the manager developing an action plan incorporating their personal summary of the strengths and weaknesses and what they will do specifically to turn things around. But as Kaplan points out, they are rarely provided assistance on the job with follow through. As he suggests, “good intentions are not enough.” The manager must have a structure of support, expert help, and be held accountable.

Thus, it is unrealistic to expect that the executive will be able to put into practice what has been learned after only one lesson. Intuitively we know this is not possible and that one-session learning is not adequate to modify long-standing patterns of executive behavior. Our experience reinforces this intuition. Executives need to be able to practice management behavior and return to the coach to discuss the executive’s experience with the plan, which is then modified accordingly. Only when the new management behavior is practiced over time and across situations will the executive gain confidence in the new management behavior and make it a permanent addition to his/her repertoire.

We have found that the coaching must be extended over a period of time to allow for both practice and a second follow-up survey. The latter enables the executive to determine whether the modifications to management behavior are having the desired impact. If the 360° survey is conducted without the follow-up and follow-through, it is really an assessment process only and the company should be realistic about its expectations for management behavior change and development. To sustain the gains and the attention to behavior, we also encourage the executive to identify a trusted colleague, share the key behaviors she wishes to change, and routinely ask for feedback or invite the colleague to spontaneously offer feedback. We also suggest the executive use our online “e” spot check to solicit interim feedback from a few key players in the business environment.

**Key Tasks for the Coach: Managing the Dissonance**

The moment the executive receives her 360° feedback is always difficult. It is at this moment that the executive becomes acutely aware of any gap between her ideal and real self. The wider the gap, the greater the dissonance and pain. This pain is the source of motivation the executive draws upon to modify management behavior. However, the pain also causes the executive’s defense mechanisms to kick in in order to blunt the feedback and modulate the pain. For example, executives say: (a)”This can’t possibly be true”—Denial, or (b)”The people who are giving me this feedback are all screwed up”—Projection, or (c)”I have had to implement a lot of changes which people don’t like”—Rationalization, or (d)”This survey is not valid because the participants represent a biased selection rather than a stratified random sample”—
Intellectualization, or (e) “I heard the feedback but I didn’t pay much attention to it and can’t remember what was said” — Repression.

It is key for the coach to help the executive work through the painful feelings generated by the 360° feedback and not let her off the hook without coming to grips with the main messages from the workplace feedback. Therefore, it is essential for the coach to assess if the executive is overwhelmed by the feedback and has shut down, or whether the executive has been impacted but still able to constructively respond to what has been heard. The coach must encourage the executive to express her emotional reaction to the feedback so that the executive’s reaction to the feedback may be ascertained.

Finally, it is critical that the coach hears from the executive in a clear, unequivocal voice what portion of the feedback she is willing to own and what she wishes to work on to increase her capabilities. It is easy to assume that the executive is as concerned about the feedback as the coach, and automatically wants to do something about it. Oftentimes, this is not the case and the executive does not really agree at all and is making liberal use of one or more of the aforementioned psychological defenses. Until the matter of feedback ownership is resolved, executive coaching cannot move from the assessment to development phase.

Developing a Meaningful Context
Without meaning there is despair. After listening to a full dose of negative 360° workplace feedback it is easy for the executive to feel that all’s lost and to throw in the towel. In fact, after listening to the feedback, it’s common for executives to feel unappreciated and misunderstood by their companies. Thus, a primary task for the coach is to help the executive place the feedback within a larger context and to understand the full and deep meaning of the feedback. The coach must communicate that, in the midst of all the pain, there is an important lesson to be learned. The coach must help the executive define the lesson and view the current predicament as an opportunity to grow.

Frequently we explore life stage issues and help the executive recognize the “normal” events of the 30’s, the 40’s and 50’s both in one’s career and in one’s personal life. It is important to remember that coaching takes place in the larger context of life events for the individual, as industry and global economic trends are germane for the company.

This is a complex task. At this juncture, the coach must be prepared to weave together into a meaningful whole all that’s known about the executive’s personal and work history, the company’s lifecycle, culture and current business factors. It is then that the coach can help the executive crystallize the lessons the environment is challenging her to learn which, in turn, generates hope and the motivation to learn. The coach must help the executive understand which aspect(s) of her management behavior is out of sync with the workplace (and maybe other parts of the executive’s life, too).

For example, the executive may have recently been promoted to a top management position, which requires even greater measures of communication, leadership and vision sharing. This may be a stretch for the otherwise analytical and reserved executive who, under the stress of the new position, may pull in even more. It may be made more difficult if the executive has been mentored and worked in cultures that did not encourage such behavior and a family of origin that emphasized privacy and circumspection. The executive must see how adding these skills will increase her value to the company. Additional motivation would be generated if the executive believed that adding these skills would increase her value as a person, as well.

It is the gap between the executive’s reflexes, or what has worked in the past, and what new muscles or capabilities must be cultivated to work effectively today and tomorrow that provides the engine for change. It’s the gap that presents the executive an opportunity for growth. It’s the coach who frames the closing of the gap as a learning opportunity and joins with the executive in generating and implementing a plan that does just that.

Encouraging Signs that Coaching Works: Initial and Confirming Results
There are no miracle cures. Moreover, quantifying management behavior change and development and being able to attribute change to executive coaching is difficult indeed. With so many variables at play and almost no ability to control them, it is practically impossible to utilize a rigorous experimental design. What may be more important, however, is to determine whether or not executive coaching participants feel the process has been worthwhile and whether they believe development and increase in capacity has occurred as a result. Executives, stingy with their time, are usually tough critics of activities that require significant amounts of it and expect a good return on their investment.

We conducted two studies of executive coaching effectiveness. Executives in both studies completed a 10-12 month, 10-session executive coaching program. Each coaching session lasted approximately 1.5 hours. The process incorporated components discussed in this article including 360° feedback, compilation of work and personal history, management behavior testing,
generation of a written development plan, and meetings with the boss and staff groups.

In both studies, we examined two large client systems. The former study was conducted with a leading developer and manufacturer of specialty materials used in the electronics, high tech, automotive and related industries; the recent study was performed at one of this country’s five largest managed health care companies. In both studies, we asked respondents about three general issues:

1. Does the executive coaching process generate valuable management behavior change?
2. What kinds of changes does this process typically produce?
3. What activities in this process contribute the most to learning and change?

In the first study, approximately 95 executives participated in the executive coaching process and 56 participated in our study. In the second study, approximately 80 executives participated in the executive coaching process, but only 16 participated in the study.

In both studies, executives were asked: How valuable was the executive coaching process in your professional development? Although the metrics employed in each study were somewhat different, in both studies more than 35% of the respondents indicated executive coaching had been either “valuable” or “extremely valuable.”

In both studies executives were asked: Do you believe you made changes in your management behavior as a result of your participation in the executive coaching process? Again, while the metrics were somewhat different in the first and second study, in both studies more than 60% of the respondents indicated they thought they had made “consistent change” in their actions.

In both studies, executives were asked: Overall, how do you rate the impact executive coaching seemed to have had on participants you have observed? In the first study, respondents indicated that 67% of all executive coaching participants demonstrated from at least “occasional” to “significant” management behavior changes. In the second study, respondents indicated that 82% of all executive coaching participants demonstrated from at least “occasional” to “significant” management behavior changes. In both studies, only about 10% reported “no changes.”

In both studies, executives were asked: How would you compare your executive coaching experience to other forms of development in similar topics (management and interpersonal effectiveness)? In the first study, a majority of the respondents indicated that the executive coaching process was either “extremely valuable” or “very valuable” and more valuable, on average, than the learning from internal coaching or from external workshops and seminars. In the second study, 50% of the respondents indicated the executive coaching process was of greater value than other programs.

In the second study, when executives were asked: In observing others who have been coached, how much change have you seen produced in the person who seemed to have gotten the most out of coaching?, 19% said they had observed “consistent, significant change,” 38% said they had observed “consistent change,” and 43% said they had observed “occasional change.”

In our second study, when executives were asked: How much change resulted from the person who got the least out of coaching? 23% reported “no change,” 39% reported “change that faded over time,” and 38% reported “occasional change.” The low degree of change may be accounted for by varying degrees of motivation for coaching. All senior executives at this company were encouraged to participate, regardless of their need and desire at the time.

Moreover, in the second study, we compared pre- and post-quantitative 360 degree feedback (using our instrument that asks respondents to rate executives 1 to 5 on 20 dimensions thought to be important for executive success) on 37 executive coaching participants.

Most interesting is that a one-to-one coaching program driven by 360° feedback appears to enhance “corporate perspective.” 360° feedback seems to increase peripheral vision, which encourages the executive to view the company as a whole rather than primarily through a functional lens. Moreover, the process of receiving feedback (“Solicits and is Open to Feedback”) results in executives being more open to the same, which undoubtedly contributes to their ongoing learning, as does the apparent increased ability to “Learn from Experience.”

In both studies, executives were asked: What contributed most to your learning? Ranked as most important were the “one-to-one coaching meetings,” “360° workplace feedback” and “generating a written development plan.”
Table 1: Pre- and Post-360 Survey Results

Significant Results from Repeated Measures T-Tests

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<th>Factor</th>
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<th>Correlation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Avoids premature closure</td>
<td>p &lt; .001</td>
<td>-.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solicits and is open to feedback</td>
<td>p &lt; .001</td>
<td>-.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takes a corporate perspective</td>
<td>p &lt; .001</td>
<td>-.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works as a team player</td>
<td>p &gt; .01</td>
<td>-.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learns from experience</td>
<td>p &lt; .01</td>
<td>-.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesizes data &amp; finds solutions</td>
<td>p &lt; .01</td>
<td>-.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delegates effectively</td>
<td>p &lt; .01</td>
<td>-.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilizes empathy constructively</td>
<td>p &lt; .01</td>
<td>-.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes good decisions</td>
<td>p &lt; .05</td>
<td>-.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, in the second study, executives were asked: *What value do these changes have for the company? Can you point to a specific way in which the company benefited from your participation in the coaching process?*

Examples of narrative comments from participants included:
- “By becoming a better manager and solidifying my own philosophy on what my area is and the value it brings to the company, it has allowed me to assume a more strategic role.”
- “Since I get along better with people, they are more open to my ideas.”
- “I focus more on my peers and am more team-oriented.”
- “I am more consistent in my approach to management and expectations are more realistic.”
- “I now understand what it takes to make the matrixed organization work.”

Of course, these results are preliminary and limited by relatively small sample size. Moreover, our survey asked respondents to make judgments about people’s behavior. The respondents, each with their personal scale of what constitutes management behavior change, may evaluate the same behavior differently. A behaviorally anchored scale and survey form may reduce rater error.

**Summary**

Learning is a core ability that determines which executives remain vital and are long distance leaders. In this era of high velocity growth probably nothing is more important than learning how to keep learning and disseminating to others what has been learned. Already, changes in organization structures and cultures have made many management behaviors obsolete. Executives, now working in flattened organizations, cannot rely on positional power to get things done. Persuasion skills, working collaboratively across functional silos, and leading and participating in the full spectrum of work groups, are required to be effective.

As indicated by our experience in the trenches and the results of our two studies, 360° feedback can make an important contribution to executive learning by providing executives an accurate picture of impact and contribution to the workplace. However, 360° feedback reflects past management behavior. If development is the objective, then the future desired end-state must be visualized, a written development plan must be generated, and the executive must be coached and supported in implementing the plan. The real payback from 360° feedback is obtained by working through the feedback and helping the executive expand his or her repertoire of management behavior.

On the one hand, we are encouraged by the data generated by our studies. Under the right conditions and exposed to a process that achieves a “threshold of intensity,” executives can be developed and management behavior modified. On the other hand, however, the results indicate that some participants did not think they or others’ management behavior improved as a consequence of the coaching, or, if it did, the change was temporary and followed by a return to business as usual. What accounts for this? We believe
at a time when we seem to have come full circle and executive coaching is ubiquitous. Now not having a coach may be a stigma or a sign that the company does not believe the executive is worth the investment.

While the 360° workplace feedback can and does generate motivation to learn and modify management behavior (especially when there is significant disparity between the executive’s self-appraisal and appraisal by others), if there’s not an openness to learning and recognition that things need to be done differently in the future than they have been done in the past, then coaching will probably yield a disappointing result. Question: How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: Just one, but the light bulb must want to change! Before nominating executives for executive coaching this question should be asked and answered to ensure that precious development resources are being properly deployed.

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Endnotes

2 M. Dalton, M. “When the purpose of using multi-rater feedback is behavior change.” In D. Bracken et al (Eds.), Should 360 feedback be used only for developmental purposes? Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership, 1997.

“...As the world continues to become more complex and uncertain, specialized technical expertise (in our terms, the ‘functional leadership’) has its limitations. Leaders today are confronted with an onslaught of what Haifetz refers to as ‘adaptive challenges.’ These challenges have no clear answers. Furthermore, a leader’s prior experience or expertise may be of little guidance in responding to adaptive challenges. In addition, exercising one’s power and authority also is limited because leaders need to rely more on their ability to ask the right questions, create deeper conversations and influence key stakeholders to reach consensus on the best possible choices and decisions... Holistic leadership...emphasizes an and/also approach. ... The new requirement for leadership capacity emphasizes the need to understand the big picture and/or also to understand its component parts. One needs to see the environment and the forest and at the same time, fully appreciate the trees and its bark.”

--D. W. Weiss and V. Molinaro, The Leadership Gap
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