The Future of Executive Coaching:
Coaching With Appreciation through a
360 Degree Feedback Process

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Executive coaching is a timely response to the postmodern challenges that face contemporary organizations. Executive coaching is also a human service field that holds great promise in the near future—especially when linked with one or more of three broad-based initiatives that are prominent in the landscape of contemporary organizational life. I briefly address the timeliness of executive coaching, then turn to its linkages with these other initiatives and, in particular, to its linkage with multi-source assessment systems and provide a case study to illustrate the interplay between executive coaching (taking an appreciative approach) and the most prominent of these assessment systems—360 Degree feedback.

It may not be coincidental that the field called executive coaching has emerged at the same time as many organizational analysts have described a postmodern world of complexity, unpredictability and turbulence. To the extent that executive coaching is about the processes of decision-making (the “executive” function) rather than a specific organizational role (the person who serves as an “executive”)—then this field is particularly timely and its future is bright.

**Timeliness of Executive Coaching: Complexity, Unpredictability and Turbulence**

I propose that any employee in an organization who must make decisions under the challenging conditions of complexity, unpredictability and turbulence can benefit from the assistance of a knowledgeable and skillful executive coach.

*Complexity* demands a level of cognitive functioning that often leaves us, as Robert Kegan suggests, “in over our heads.” We must be able to understand and grapple with complex problems that are often nested inside other complex problems or are juxtaposed with other problems in dilemmas. In complex settings we are faced with an additional challenge: we must simultaneously be able to think about our own thinking. We must be able to learn from our mistakes (and successes), as well as be aware of the setting in which we learn and in which we don’t learn (often called meta-learning).

We are even more challenged when faced with *uncertainty*. Under conditions of uncertainty, obviously, we can’t predict what will happen next. However, there is an additional challenge: we are continually faced with new information that comes from many different angles. We must continually accommodate to this new information while abandoning—at least temporarily—old assimilated models, assumptions, and social constructions of organizational reality. In Kurt Lewin’s terms we are always unfreezing and never have a chance to settle in with our new learning and new accommodation.

*Turbulence* further compounds the challenge, given that we, as decision-makers, must live in a swirling “white water world” in which rapid change intermixes with patterned change, stagnation and chaos. Somehow in the midst of this turbulence—which is driven by ever-accelerating change—we must find our own personal (some would say “spiritual”) core. We search for sanctuary from this turbulence and must always adjust to a world with new change-dynamics. At the end of the day, we can’t even remember what happened to us at the start of the day—because we have had to make so many adjustments throughout the day!

If we, as executive coaches, can make a case for the value of the services we render as being directly aligned with, appreciative of, and effective in addressing the challenges of complexity, unpredictability and turbulence, then we can anticipate that the field of executive coaching will be sustained. If we can make a particularly strong case, then this endeavor called executive coaching will play a growing and increasingly important role in 21st Century organizational life.

**Linkage of Executive Coaching To Other Broad-Based Organizational Initiatives**

How does one establish this alignment between executive coaching and the three challenges of postmodern organizational life? I propose that this alignment can readily be established if executive coaching is linked to one of three organizational initiatives: (1) leadership development and training,
The percentage has used some form of multi-source assessment system for ninety percent of the Fortune 1000 companies by 1996 of impact—this “tipping point”—an executive coach can be of great benefit. This can be a “coachable moment” when the knowledge and skill of the executive coach can be directly brought to bear in helping a decision-maker face the challenge of complexity, unpredictability and turbulence.

In future issues of this journal I hope to identify executive coaching strategies that are particularly appropriate in response to the unique challenges of leadership development and training, and the substantial challenges of strategic planning and planned organizational change and transformation. The attention in this article will be placed on the interplay between executive coaching and multi-source feedback processes—and, in particular, the family of feedback processes often labeled “360 Degree Feedback.”

Multi-Source Feedback: The 360 Degree Feedback Process

Though it is plagued with many problems, multi-source feedback processes for appraising the performance of employees are currently receiving extensive attention in corporate life. By 1996, at least one quarter of the business organizations in the United States reported using a multi-source feedback process. Furthermore, “more than ninety percent of the Fortune 1000 companies [by 1996 used] some form of multi-source assessment system for at least developmental feedback.” The percentage has probably grown much larger since 1996. This enthusiasm is accompanied by an equally impressive controversy concerning the appropriate use and potential costs and benefits associated with this process.

Often labeled 360-Degree feedback, multi-source assessment requires that several different people within (and sometimes outside) the organization assess an employee’s performance. Typically, the employee does a self-assessment and this assessment is compared with assessments completed by other people who are familiar with this employee’s work.

Multi-source assessment is about expanding the perspective of an employee regarding her own performance. It is also about broadening the base of an assessment and hopefully improving the validity of data gathered about an employee’s performance. This performance appraisal process begins with the self-assessment by the employee, along with the assessment by this employee’s supervisor. This is called 1 Degree feedback. Then the expansion begins. The most common types of expansion are up, down and sideways in the organization. The assessment by colleagues (lateral) is called 90 Degree feedback, while upward assessment by subordinates is labeled 180 Degree feedback.

At a more ambitious level, the scope of this assessment can be expanded to include other people inside and outside the organization. These are the so-called 360 Degree feedback processes. 360 Degree feedback programs may include other employees in the organization who have been impacted by the employee’s performance. These are often identified as internal customers of the employee who is being assessed. A 360 Degree feedback assessment might also include people outside the organization who are directly served by the employee or who benefit indirectly from his work. These are the external customers. Frequently, customers are brought in not only to provide feedback but also help design the process.

The true 360 Degree feedback process involves all of these sources, though in a few cases, a multi-source assessment may be even more extensive, involving the solicitation of appraisals from members of the employee’s family, friends or former employers. This extensive review is typically oriented toward employee development, rather than being used for personnel decisions. It is usually only available to the highest-level employees in an organization and is rarely mandatory. In yet other cases, the 360 Degree feedback process is conducted with a team rather than an individual employee. Data are gathered not only from team members, but also from customers, independent observers and raters, other teams in the organization, and the supervisor to whom the team reports. In some instances an entire organization has conducted a 360-Degree feedback process regarding its own operations.

Three Tiers of Assessment

The 360 Degree feedback process involves either two or three tiers of assessment. The first tier is self-assessment. The employee usually rates his own performance using the same scale that is distributed to the other people involved in the 360 Degree assessment. When I conduct a 360 process, there is an additional questionnaire filled out by the person being assessed. I ask this person to predict how he thinks the other people completing the scale will rate him.

The second tier is assessment by others. In most cases, the employee helps to select the people who will rate him, though the final list remains confidential to preserve anonymity. Typically, seven or eight colleagues are asked to complete the rating scale, though this number may be as great as twenty-five or as little as four or five. The
employee is usually provided with ample information regarding the tier-two ratings. The employee's own ratings are usually juxtaposed with ratings from the other feedback sources. Sometimes, the ratings are compared with ratings given to other employees in the organization. The ratings for an employee might even be compared to national norms if the feedback instrument was purchased from a major vendor.14

There is a third tier that is rarely addressed in a 360 Degree feedback process. This third tier concerns assessment of the context or culture in which the employee operates and in which the ratings are being solicited. Much as a fish can't tell you much about the water in which she swims, so an employee and her colleagues can rarely tell you much about the setting in which they work. This setting, however, has an impact on their performance and their perceptions of one another. While many 360 Degree advocates suggest that multi-source feedback can influence organizational culture,15 most fail to recognize that influence can also flow in the opposite direction: organizational culture can influence the ratings being given to individual employees engaged in a 360 Degree feedback process.

The Challenges of 360 Degree Feedback
Whether a Two Tier or Three Tier system is engaged, the major challenge is one of managing the complexity of data being analyzed. This complexity confronts both those who administer this system and those who receive the feedback. As Tornow and London observe:16

Clearly, this is no small task. It requires a good deal of cognitive complexity, in addition to affective acknowledgment of the validity and legitimacy of the feedback. It also requires balancing multiple and perhaps conflicting perspectives, as well as balancing a sense of self with the larger context and role requirements.

Tornow and London have identified an important drawback to many 360-Degree feedback processes. The reports that are prepared often produce information overload, and may produce a sense of despair, perhaps because multi-source feedback is usually accompanied by very few follow-up services. The employee receives an impressive, highly creditable report filled with colorful charts and graphs. She is told how to make sense of these graphs and numbers—and is then left alone to navigate the stormy sea this type of report can stir up. Recent research suggests that only forty percent of the multi-source feedback systems are linked to development programs that specifically address the areas being assessed in the 360 Degree feedback.17 Much of the bad press regarding 360 Degree feedback processes is generated by this insensitive and often abusive policy of providing the feedback without follow-up services.

As the leaders of the Center for Creative Leadership have repeatedly noted, the qualities being assessed in a 360 Degree feedback process should always be developable, whether this process is being used for personnel decisions or for development.18 The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) has been at the forefront of leadership development programs and 360-Degree feedback processes for many years; hence, the insights of CCL staff regarding the essential link between 360 Degree feedback processes and development should be given credence:19

Although it is useful to gain self-knowledge about aspects of character that are stable (and therefore not changeable), it is important for managers to know that characteristics being assessed are also amenable to development, especially when improvement is the goal. Behavioral or otherwise observable items forming scales that relate to practices or perspectives one can change are the most useful form for 360-Degree feedback, in that it enables managers to engage in a goal-setting and development-planning process that enhances involvement and self-determination.

A 360 Degree feedback process can generate several additional psychological storms even if presented in a thoughtful and appreciative manner. First, the data from other people in the organization can dis-confirm an employee’s sense of self. Substantial research suggests that there is usually greater concurrence in the ratings of peers, subordinates and superiors, than there is between the self-ratings of an employee and any one of these three rating groups.20

Employees are likely to be surprised by the appraisals being offered by other people in their organization. The employees who are least effective and most likely to receive negative feedback are particularly vulnerable, for research studies indicate that these employees are likely to be most surprised by the feedback they receive.21 They are particularly inclined to over-rate their own performance. Atwater suggests that this dis-confirmation is particularly difficult for poor performers with high self-esteem:22

These individuals tended not to accept negative feedback because it was inconsistent with their self-perceptions. This pattern creates a vicious cycle wherein the high self-esteem perpetuates inaccurate self-perception by causing individuals to deny information that contradicts their high opinions of themselves. The implications of these findings about self-esteem . . . suggest a particular problem if the high self-esteem is unfounded and negative feedback is needed. If the feedback is discounted so as to maintain the positive self-esteem, it will be difficult to convince these individuals that change is necessary.
The force of the data received in a 360 Degree feedback process creates a second storm for its recipients. While it is easy to dismiss the feedback from a boss or from a direct report, it is much harder to dismiss this feedback when it comes from several sources and these sources tend to agree with one another. The increasing reliability and validity of the 360 Degree tools that are being used produces even greater threat. There is no way to escape from or discount these finely wrought statistics. Given the credibility of the feedback, the recipient is faced with the task of learning something new about himself. As a learner, the 360 Degree participant must be willing to seek out additional feedback to gain greater clarity about areas for further development. Feedback recipients must be willing to live outside their comfort zone and must be willing to “take the risk of engaging in activities that challenge their skills and abilities.”

A poorly administered 360 Degree feedback process is likely to create yet another psychological storm. This storm arises from the alteration of relationships with colleagues that many 360 Degree feedback processes produce. In most instances, the feedback one receives comes from anonymous sources. The feedback recipient typically doesn’t know specifically who has rated him, though the recipient usually has helped to create a list of potential raters. Thus, when the feedback is received, employees will inevitably wonder who filled out the rating form and why they rated as they did.

The feedback recipient often would like to talk with those who completed the rating; yet, they know that this can’t be done without shattering the anonymity and confidentiality barriers. These are perfect conditions for mild paranoia and for an employee to project his own fears and uncertainties about self onto other people with whom he works. Without adequate follow-up, a 360 Degree feedback process can destroy a sense of teamwork and create a climate of suspicion and mistrust.

I propose that there are five primary areas in which executive coaching from an appreciative perspective can be most effective when linked to 360 Degree feedback. The appreciative executive coach can help the recipient of the feedback:

1. understand and sort through the complex (often contradictory) information contained in the feedback report,
2. reduce non-constructive defensiveness and damaging loss of self-esteem associated with unanticipated feedback,
3. identify strengths and successes inherent in the feedback, so that this appreciation of strengths and successes can motivate and serve as guidance for addressing the areas where further development is needed,
4. trace out the implications of this feedback for decisions to be made in the future, and
5. retain the lessons learned from the feedback and maximize the application of these lessons (transfer of learning) in the workplace (and potentially elsewhere in the recipient’s life).

I wish to bring these five areas of executive coaching alive by closing this article with a case study of executive coaching that has been linked directly with a 360 Degree feedback process.

Case Study: Sam Agagarian

Sam Agagarian is CEO of a very large human service agency—I will call it the Human Service Center (HSC)—located in an urban region of the Pacific Northwest. He has served as CEO of HSC for the past eight years and has brought his organization to a place where it is thriving financially and has received many national awards as a “healthy” place in which to work and in which to receive services. Sam comes to his 360 Degree feedback and the supporting executive coaching process not as a colleague who is in trouble, but as someone who wants to sustain and further improve his performance as an
organizational leader. An appreciative approach has been particularly appropriate for and valued by Sam—as it is with many highly successful leaders.

How Did I Get Involved?
I received a call several years ago from a colleague who had recently graduated from the senior level certification program I conduct. I knew from conversations with her (I will call her Sara) that Sara was involved in a comprehensive executive coaching program with HSC. She also informed me that HSC had been involved in a large-scale 360 Degree feedback program for many years and that all of the senior level administration of HSC had participated in this program.

Sara indicated to me that all the vice presidents of HSC had recently received feedback from a 360 Degree process and that they all were receiving executive coaching from Sara or one of her colleagues, as a way to make this feedback more useful to them. In the past, little was done other than distribute and interpret the 360 results. I was very pleased that she had been able to couple coaching with the 360.

Sara then told me that the president and CEO of HSC had not yet engaged in the latest 360 process and that she felt uncomfortable conducting this 360 with him or following up with executive coaching to him. Her reticence was based on her concern that she was already coaching many of his subordinates and that she thought he would benefit more from a “senior-level” executive coach who could offer both extensive experience and academic credibility. Sara thought that I would be a good fit. I agreed to take on the assignment.

Why the 360-Degree Feedback and Executive Coaching?
I met with Sam Agagarian in his large, cluttered office that looked out over the city he served. I was more anxious than usual in starting this new executive coaching engagement, in part because I knew of his reputation as a competent and highly acclaimed executive leader. What would I have to offer? Sam and I met twice for two hours apiece to accomplish two tasks. First, we designed a 360 Degree feedback instrument and process that would meet his needs. Second, we both were checking out our relationship to see if a long-term executive coaching process might be appropriate.

There was also a third reason that I did not overtly articulate to Sam. I wanted to identify the reasons why he wanted to participate in this feedback and coaching process. By the end of our first two-hour meeting I had discovered four reasons. Two of the reasons were not very strong. The other two convinced me that this would be a worthy endeavor.

I find the first of the reasons to be common among administrators participating in 360s. Administrators engage in 360s because their colleagues have already completed them and everyone “has to take their medicine.” This rather macho approach to 360s is not very helpful. It implies that the 360 feedback is primarily negative in nature and that the recipient is to successfully “defend” against this feedback rather than use it for improvement. All of Sam’s vice presidents had completed the process and Sam “had” to do it to show that he could “take it” just as his subordinates did. This is not a very good reason.

The second reason was also not very convincing. A 360 Degree feedback process had been completed three years ago at HSC and therefore should be done again. Precedence is never sufficient justification for any personal or organizational intervention. There are several benefits, however, to be derived from precedence—if one honors the work already done.

As consultants or coaches we can replicate the process previously engaged and in this way gain invaluable longitudinal data about the person or organization we are studying. In this case, I encouraged Sam to use the same 360 instrument that was used three years ago—with several additions and modifications. In this way, we could track changes in the ratings and qualitative feedback he received from this instrument. While the 360 instrument that had been used three years before was not among the best I have seen, it had been tailored for Sam and HSC, and was owned by HSC (hence could be modified without requiring outside permission).

The third and fourth reasons were excellent and led me to reconfirm my acceptance of the 360 Degree feedback and executive coaching assignment. It became clear to me within the first hour of our interaction that Sam was vitally interested in his own ongoing professional development. He strongly (and knowledgeably) supported the use of executive coaching by all of his vice presidents and he was envious of the services they were receiving. Sam wanted his own coach and wanted this coach to begin working with him in conjunction with the date he was about to receive from the 360 feedback.

It became apparent to me almost immediately that Sam could use some assistance in interpreting the 360 feedback, given that he intended (as he did three years before) to request feedback from a broad constituency—more than 20 people. Some of these would be respondents who are members of the HSC staff. Others would come from outside his immediate staff. They would be members of his board of directors, community leaders—even CEOs from institutions that competed with HSC for services. I immediately liked and admired this man and his willingness (even eagerness) to receive and make use of feedback from many different sources.
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The fourth reason was also persuasive. My colleague (Sara) had thoughtfully and carefully established a comprehensive executive coaching program that was tied not only to the 360 feedback process, but also to the building of an effective executive management team and establishment of a new master plan for HSC. I trusted Sara’s intentions, her competence and her appreciative perspective with regard to coaching (a perspective I strongly embrace). I believe that 360 feedback processes can be powerful and appropriate motivators for engaging in executive coaching. Conversely, an existing executive coaching program can be a constructive and motivating gateway to enter a 360 Degree feedback process. I identify this strategy as “instrumented coaching” and make extensive use of instruments of many different types in my own executive coaching work.27

Linking 360 Degree Feedback Processes to Executive Coaching

One of the challenges facing anyone who designs and implements 360 Degree feedback systems concerns the complexity of the information that is collected. If there is to be no follow-up from the 360, other than one or two hours of interpretation, then the data that are gathered must be kept relatively simple—both conceptually and the way they are presented. There usually are no more than ten to fifteen categories and the data are presented in graphic form (with no more than 2 or 3 data points per category). This restriction is not required if executive coaching supplements the feedback. One can gather rich data that represent many different categories and perspectives. The coach and colleague (I prefer to use this term rather than “client”) can readily work with statistics (such as standard deviation scores rather than just points on a graph) and qualitative data (such as quotations, thematic analyses, metaphors, and vignettes).

Given that Sam and I were going to engage in executive coaching, I suggested that the 360 feedback process contain several unusual components. First, I recommended that the standard categories focusing on Sam’s competencies (360 feedback processes are inevitably normative in nature) be supplemented with four items (brief case studies) that would yield information about Sam’s interpersonal style (a descriptive rather than normative approach to 360 feedback). Second, I recommended that Sam complete a self-assessment version of the 360 instrument. This version invited Sam to rate himself with regard to both competencies and interpersonal style.28 Third, I made an unusual request of Sam: I invited him to fill out a third version of the 360 instrument which asked Sam to predict how he thinks his colleagues will rate him with regard to his competencies and interpersonal styles. Sam agreed to all three of these modifications.

The Outcomes

Data were gathered on Sam’s competencies and styles from 22 people. There was an impressive 100% rate of return. In addition, Sam completed the Self-Assessment and Prediction versions of the 360 inventory. I assembled all the data (along with written comments made by many of the respondents). Sam and I reviewed the data over a period of two months (two-hour sessions every two to three weeks). Upon completing this intensive review we decided to keep meeting once a month in order to engage in a formal executive coaching process.

During our coaching sessions we decided to address five themes that had emerged from review of the 360 feedback data:

1. Several of Sam’s major strengths [loyalty, nurturing attitude, thoughtfulness] also gets him in trouble. [Sam is unwilling to make hard decisions, he often delays decisions, and may have too many personal relationships with his subordinates],

2. Respondents are worried about Sam burning out. [Sam assumes too much responsibility and works too many hours each day],

3. Sam needs to build a stronger vice presidential team and give them more responsibility. [Too many people are going around the vice presidents to work directly with Sam],

4. One of Sam’s vice presidents is a source of major problems for many members of the organization. [She must be confronted by Sam], and

5. Sam is the “heart and soul” of the organization. [Sam must begin (as a man in his early 60s) to address the difficult issue of succession planning].

Conclusions

It’s now two years later. Sam and I are still working on these issues. He has engaged in a major reorganization plan that helps HSC prepare for new leadership, has directly confronted his problematic vice president and has begun to do a better job of setting boundaries around his own time. The insights he gained regarding his strengths getting him in trouble came directly from the interpersonal style items on the 360 Degree feedback inventory. Sam found the style ratings (descriptive) to be of much greater value than the competency ratings (normative).

I suspect that many senior administrators, like Sam, are aware of their shortcomings and their areas of incompetence. What’s “news” to them are the many ways in which the strengths on which they have long relied are also sources of their problems and pitfalls. These in-
sights are not simple “oh, that’s what happens.” Rather, they tend to come from long, reflective deliberations and the analysis of many specific problems—in an ongoing executive coaching process. This is where executive coaching can benefit most from a linkage to 360 Degree feedback processes and where the future of executive coaching might look most bright.

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Endnotes

1 Notable analysts include Peter Drucker, Rosabeth Kanter, Peter Vaill, Margaret Wheatley, Ralph Stacey and William Bergquist.
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