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From Fear of Feedback to Story
Changing Tool:
Why doing a 360 assessment is
something you want to do today.

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From Fear to Empowerment: Why doing a 360 Assessment is Something You want to do Today

What words would your colleagues, direct reports, and supervisors choose to describe you? Are you considered more open and communicative or rigid and difficult to work with? If someone perceives you as the latter, how can you change his or her opinion of you to the former? How can you revamp your personal brand? Believe it or not, the traditionally dreaded 360 assessment is the ideal tool for the task.

Also known as multi-source assessments, 360s have long been used for gathering feedback. There are many benefits to gaining insights on what the people in your professional ecosystem consider your strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement, including unearthing new opportunities to grow and develop. However, one of the most valuable benefits of performing a 360 is the least recognized: as a launching pad for solidifying, reestablishing, or correcting your leadership credibility and image. One's brand can be either a career enhancer or a limiter.^{1 2} Using the 360 to reestablish or strengthen your professional image is a powerful tool to take control of your leadership brand.

Your leadership story should be intentional. It should align with your goals versus the stories others have chosen to remember and tell about you as a leader. As you may be aware, unfortunately, humans tend to remember only what they choose, thus making even the most recent eyewitness accounts (and feedback) unreliable.³

Don't leave how your leadership is experienced up for interpretation. Instead, use the feedback from your 360 as a starting point for conversations about how you are looking to improve. In doing so, the assessment becomes a way for you to craft your own new leadership story. You are using the 360 to take advantage of the long-held human tradition of using stories to convey a leader's vision for the future, and to have that story be retold and a positive part of history.⁴

¹ Clark, D. (2014, December 16). Reinventing Your Personal Brand. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2011/03/reinventing-your-personal-brand>.

² Corkindale, G. (2014, July 23). The Return of the Personal Brand. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2008/02/the-return-of-the-personal-bra>.

³ Arkowitz, H. (2010, January 01). Why Science Tells Us Not to Rely on Eyewitness Accounts. Retrieved from <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/do-the-eyes-have-it/>.

⁴ Denning, S. (2012, March 27). The Science Of Storytelling. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2012/03/09/the-science-of-storytelling/#1bb70d262d8a>.

What is a 360 assessment?

A 360-degree assessment incorporates feedback from all an employee's stakeholders, including managers, peers, direct reports, cross-functional partners and, when appropriate, customers (internal and external). It is called a 360, because the assessment identifies from a 360-degree perspective all the people the employee interacts with. While 360 assessments have been around since the 1950s, they didn't gain mass popularity in the 1990s, and now over a third of U.S. companies employ them or similar multi-source feedback mechanisms.⁵

A 360 is most often used to determine an employee's areas for development as opposed to evaluation purposes, as feedback can be highly subjective and based on singular experiences. In some instances, one negative encounter from a stakeholder can color their opinion of the employee's performance for years to come. In addition, there is often a lack of stakeholder experience in providing reliable feedback that accurately depicts the value of the employee being assessed to the organization.

Furthermore, for many organizations, the data-gathering process is the end in itself, and not a starting point for improvement and more open communication.⁶ This often makes the 360 a dreaded experience of receiving feedback without any real benefit for the company or individual.⁷ Imagine opening yourself up to and receiving feedback—most of it is good, but a small amount is hard to hear and leaves marks. Without a process to acknowledge and take action on it, the negative feedback can fester and undermine success. Sadly, this is a common, negative 360 experience. But, there is a much more productive and empowering way to employ the 360.

Taking Control of Your Brand

What if you could turn your dissenters into your biggest fans? Instead of seeing you as someone who is rigid, difficult or ineffective, they can begin to see you as a leader who is continually evolving, improving, and controlling their path. When you grow in ways they want to see and support your own success, their story of you starts to change in a positive way. That is the power of the 360.

Receiving and taking action based upon 360-degree feedback gives leaders an opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to improving. It should be standard practice for 360 feedback recipients to close out with feedback providers on what they understood from the 360. But because the process opens up so much vulnerability, most people are too sheepish to take this step. This dread associated with 360 assessments is one of its biggest drawbacks. If you are not used to asking for and

⁵ Hezlett, Sarah A. "Using Multisource Feedback to Develop Leaders: Applying Theory and Research to Improve Practice." *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, vol. 10, no. 5, 2008, pp. 703–720.

⁶ Pfau, B., & Kay, I. (2018, April 11). *Performance Management*. Retrieved from https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/pages/0602pfau_kay.aspx.

⁷ Peiperl, M. (2014, August 01). *Getting 360-Degree Feedback Right*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2001/01/getting-360-degree-feedback-right>.

receiving feedback, this can be a scary process. However, if leaders begin to reframe their 360s as launchpads for revamping their professional image and controlling their own narratives, they will begin to find much more value and power in the process. Here's how.

Using Your 360 to Change Your Story

1. Close out with 360 participants after data gathering

After you receive the data from your 360, take it for what it is. It is a snapshot of you at a point in time ... the past from other people's perspective. You may not agree with it, but it is their truth, and the story they are telling about you. While you might be upset about their reality, think of it as playing a game of cards. The 360 asks others to show you their hands. That is very powerful information to have to determine your next move.

Take this opportunity to circle back with all the people who were asked to participate to thank them, highlight the strengths you will continue to deploy, and focus on areas of growth. Tell them you will be asking them for ongoing feedback on your improvements or, if you are slipping, what you could do differently.

Yes, this requires a great deal of humility on your part. Remember, they just showed you their hand in a card game. Now, it's your move. Use the information to your advantage. People appreciate knowing what happened to their feedback, especially if it leads to positive change. When you communicate with them that you have internalized their feedback and are eager to implement it, they will admire your openness and likely be more willing to give you a chance to improve.

2. Solicit ongoing feedback

As part of the closeout, invite people to provide you with ongoing feedback about your areas of growth. There are two reasons for this:

1. It is only when others know you are trying to improve that they can be on the lookout for your improvement.
2. People are busy, and they won't remember to provide you with feedback unless you ask them directly.

The good thing is that it will feel natural to ask for feedback on a regular basis since you've already set the foundation during the 360 closeout.

Example: After leaving a meeting, approach the person who rated your listening skills negatively and ask, "As you know, I'm working on doing a better job of listening. Did I cut anyone off?"

Notice you are asking for negative feedback. The reason for this is that when people ask for feedback, the feedback provider often wonders if the person is really ready to hear it. When you ask for feedback that is negative, like “Did I cut anyone off?”, the feedback provider can relax and give you the truth, because they see you recognize your shortcomings. They feel free to respond, “Yes, you did interrupt others,” or “No, I think you definitely did a much better job of listening, and I didn’t hear you cut anyone off.”

This is how your story begins to change.

Now, imagine that person runs into your manager later that week. Your manager asks, “How did that budget meeting go? I know there were concerns going into it.” The person is able to say, “It went great. In fact, I thought Kelly [you] did a really good job facilitating the meeting and being an empathic listener. I told her so.”

And then the next time that person is asked to provide feedback for a 360 or, even more importantly, for a performance review, they are able to explicitly recall positive experiences with you that override previous negative ones.

By repeating this process, you begin to change that person’s view of you for the better. First, you have softened them up by accepting their assessment of you—you have validated their belief. Next, by showing them how you are changing your behavior, you are weakening the connection between what they believed about you and what they see. Then by discussing with them how the changes in your behavior are leading you down a new path, you are reconnecting their beliefs to a new, better story about you.⁸

You have successfully used the information in your 360 to plant the seeds of change, build a stronger personal brand for yourself and take control of your leadership story.

Conclusion

“ ... If we don’t control our own narrative and show the world what we can contribute, odds are very few people will actually notice.”⁹

Undergoing a 360 gives leaders an unparalleled opportunity to connect with all the people in their professional ecosystem to show them—through open communication, humility, and intentional action—that they are committed to growing and becoming a better co-worker and leader. Using this valuable information to take control of your narrative and write the true story of your evolving leadership, it transforms what can be a disheartening, dreaded process into a vehicle for empowerment and brand building. With enough people providing feedback based on your new story of openness, improvement, and growth, the 360 becomes the start of a strategic leadership story changer.

⁸ James, G. (2017, September 07). How to Change People's Minds. Retrieved from <https://www.inc.com/geoffrey-james/how-to-change-peoples-minds.html>.

⁹ Clark, Dorie. “How Women Can Develop - and Promote - Their Personal Brand.” Harvard Business Review, 7 June 2018, hbr.org/2018/03/how-women-can-develop-and-promote-their-personal-brand.