

"360 Degrees of Self-Awareness": How Feedback Develops Successful Leaders

Countless studies have found that 360-degree feedback contributes strongly to individual improvement. It allows the collection of performance information from multiple perspectives that add validity to the performance evaluation. It is a method by which feedback can be provided in a constructive manner, decreasing employee defensiveness to direct feedback and increasing employee motivation. The studies note that the 360 process provides 'significant learning potential as most individuals are surprised by what they hear' as **'only a fraction of managers have a good grasp of their own abilities.'**

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It is argued that 'self-awareness is the cornerstone of development'. Self-awareness can be defined as an understanding of one's personality, preferences and abilities and how these are displayed in one's proficiency in their role. It is believed that by knowing about oneself, one is able to refine inherent talents and polish those that are perhaps rustier.

Research in the workplace suggests that intelligence contributes to only 20% of a person's career success; it is 'emotional intelligence' which accounts for the majority of one's achievement. Furthermore, self-awareness is the most important 'emotional competency' required in the creation a successful career. So vital is an awareness of the self that the manager who is 'unaware of his/her blind spots or how she/he impacts others... [becomes] a walking disaster in the

workplace; a leader who may lead the troops over the cliff'.

There is a large body of evidence to illustrate that 'enhanced self-awareness leads to increased effectiveness'. This was clearly illustrated in an investigation into the relationship between leadership behaviours and perceptions of effectiveness in the working relationships of employees. It was found that there was a positive relationship between high levels of managerial self-awareness and individual effectiveness (as rated by supervisors).

A number of studies have found that **high performers** were significantly more **self-aware** than their average counterparts. It should also be noted that an individual with a high level of self-awareness is likely to perform better at work, as they are more aware of what skills are necessary in successful leadership and management.

360-degree feedback works on the basis that the **awareness of any discrepancy between how individuals see themselves and how others view them enhances self-awareness**. Differences in perspectives are an important source of information, which enhances self-understanding. Information from multiple perspectives is necessary because information from our own self-awareness is often unreliable.

Research evidence suggests that self-understanding is an awareness that appears to be deficient in most people. **Self-ratings are often 'inflated, unreliable, invalid, biased and generally suspect when compared to the rating of others'**. Van Velsor and Wall discovered that over-rating was almost twice as common as under-rating. In their study they found that only 10% of managers rated themselves accurately - in accordance with how others rated them. Thus those with inflated or deflated self-ratings stand to gain more from 360-degree feedback than those with accurate self-ratings.

It was found that after receiving [360 degree] feedback, participants with inflated self-perceptions significantly reduced their self-evaluations and improved their leadership performance (Atwater et al. 1993 cited in Garavan, Morely & Flynn, 1997).

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It was found that after receiving feedback, participants with inflated self-perceptions significantly reduced their self-evaluations and **improved their leadership performance**. Those with deflated self-perceptions increased their self-evaluations whilst their performance remained the same. The power of 360-degree feedback is clear, without it our own self-understanding is limited.

It can be argued that 'to reach full potential you need a good handle on where you stand so heed the dictum: "Know Thyself." It is necessary to dispel the disparity between how we perceive ourselves and how others regard us, which is made possible by 360-degree feedback surveys.

Two important conclusions can be drawn from the body of evidence from the workplace. Firstly, the development of self-awareness is an acutely necessary skill for effective leadership and management. It follows that leadership development programmes that do not include the enhancement of self-understanding are likely to be ineffective in the creation of better managers.

From the findings on self-awareness, it can be concluded that 'the development, implementation and maintenance of a high-quality 360-degree feedback system should be a priority for any organisation that aims to have a team-based structure'.

References

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McCarthy, A. M. & Garavan T. N. (1999) 'Developing Self-Awareness In The Managerial Career Development Process, Journal of European Industrial Training, Vol. 23, No. 9, pp.437-445.