

360° Feedback: An Overview

“It is much more difficult to judge oneself than to judge others.”

--Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900-1944)
The Little Prince (1943)

“O wad some power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!
It wad frae monie a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion.”

--Robert Burns (1759-1796)
To a Louse (1786)

It's all about increased self-awareness. The term **360° Feedback** refers to a method of—

- (1) systematically collecting opinions about an individual's performance from self and a wide range of people who have observed the person in action
- (2) communicating that information to the individual in a manner that helps the person enhance performance, be it to augment a current strength or to eliminate a current weakness.

Research indicates that 360° feedback—if done **systematically**, with the right **instrumentation**, and with appropriate **coaching**--can improve performance and lead to sustained behavioral change over time.¹

Question: Why does performance improve using this method?

Answer: Because many of us do not seek or get regular feedback regarding our performance, we are often unaware regarding its adequacy and, thus, continue to perform as we have, usually leading to no growth. We are somewhat blind to our strengths and weaknesses. When systematic feedback from others is provided in an understandable fashion, we can raise our awareness of our strengths and weaknesses and thus can choose to make the changes we need to become more effective in our role performance.

¹ Atwater, L., Rousch, P., & Fischtal, A. (1995). The influence of upward feedback on self and follower ratings of leadership. *Personnel Psychology*, 48, 35-59; Smither, G. M., London, M., Vasilopoulos, N., Reilly R., Millsap, R., & Salvemini, N. (1995). An examination of the effects of an upward feedback program over time. *Personnel Psychology*, 48, 1-34; Van Velsor, E., Ruderman, M., & Phillips, D. (1992). The impact of feedback on self-assessment and performance in three domains of management behavior. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, April, St. Louis.

When we look in the mirror at our behavior or performance, we often see in **ourselves** only what we wish to see or see only what we fear to see; we **cannot** see what **other** people see. Our self-perceptions are naturally narrow and naturally biased. Our self-image is not necessarily that held by others. Each of us has blind spots regarding what others see in our behavior, blind spots that can only be revealed through feedback (see the attached model “The Johari Window”). Until a person truly sees his or her performance from the multiple perspectives provided by 360° feedback, one cannot be fully aware of the quality of his or her performance.

Feedback given in a 360° manner is provided to the individual from multiple perspectives; at work, one can receive feedback from peers, co-workers, superiors, direct reports, customers, vendors—all those stakeholders that are in positions either to directly observe the person’s performance or are affected by the performance. Usually, all stakeholders--the individual included--complete the same well-constructed instrument anonymously and send in their data to an outside compiler, who arrays the information in an understandable format and shares its conclusions with the individual in a straightforward, supportive manner—all in an effort to help the person improve. An improvement plan, based on the feedback is then created by the individual who activates it with the help of his or her coach.

The process is very much like what conscientious football coaches do a day or two after each game. Along with the team and the rest of the coaches, they observe, analyze, and evaluate individual and team performance as shown on the game film (shot by multiple cameras from multiple angles). They do so to help everyone see strengths and areas of opportunity, to see what worked and what didn’t, and to plan to make the necessary corrections during the next week’s practice. Feedback, given this way, serves as “the breakfast of champions,” for it stimulates people to **stop** some behaviors that are not working, **start** some more-workable others, and **continue** those that are already working well.

This feedback process works best when the results are used solely for developmental purposes. If raters know the data will be used as the basis for promotions or salary improvements, they generally rate people more leniently and less accurately and, thus, really don’t contribute to their development.

Question: Are people naturally defensive regarding this manner of feedback?

Answer: Heck, Yes!!! Whenever we receive information about ourselves that does not fit our self-perception—that feels foreign--we naturally defend ourselves by denial, deflection, attack, withdrawal, or some other creative psychologically protective device. Just as the human body tends to naturally reject an organ transplanted from another, the human mind naturally tries automatically to guard itself from feedback from others that does not square with our its own limited view, especially if that information may encourage change and cause the subsequent the hard work of reintegration of one’s self-image.

When faced with 360° feedback, people create all sorts of excuses. Here are the top ten reasons, contributed by the Center for Creative Leadership²:

10. My job makes me act that way; I'm really not like that.
9. This was just a bad time to ask for feedback.
8. All my strengths are right, but my weaknesses are not.
7. Everyone has it in for me.
6. I used to be that way, but I have changed recently.
5. Nobody understands what I'm going through.
4. This must be someone else's report.
3. My raters didn't understand the questions.
2. They're all jealous of my success.
1. It's all accurate, but I just don't care.

Question: What can be done to reduce defensiveness?

- Answer:
1. An organizational-management culture and climate that emphasize honesty, trust, personal accountability, self-development and growth rather than dictation, coercion, pretense, shame, punishment, and fear
 2. A common instrument that is appropriately designed, reliable, valid, and administered conscientiously
 3. A supportive coach to help the participant understand and use the feedback in ways that produce positive changes in behavior and performance
 4. Openness on the part of the individual to feedback, a strong desire to improve, the emotional maturity to sustain confidence, and the courage and discipline to change

² Chappelow, C. T. (1998). "360° feedback." In *The Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Leadership Development*. Eds. McCauley, C. D., et al. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp. 28-65.

Attachment: The Johari Window

The **Johari Window** (which has a nice mystical ring to it but is actually named after Joe Luft and Harry Ingram, two consultants) has four panes:

		OTHERS	
		<i>See</i>	<i>Don't See</i>
WE	<i>See</i>	Open	Hidden
	<i>Don't See</i>	Blind	Unknown

The **open** pane represents things about us that are apparent to others and ourselves.

The **hidden** pane represents things we know about ourselves but don't reveal to others.

The **unknown** pane represents things about ourselves about which neither others nor we are aware (such as, perhaps, subconscious motivations).

The **blind** pane represents things that others see about us but about which we're not aware.

Learning about things in the blind pane permits us to "see ourselves as others see us."