

Increasing the ROI in Your 360° Investment— The Crucial Conversations 720°

By Kerry Patterson

Imagine your boss asks you to take part in a survey process wherein your subordinates, leaders, and peers answer questions about your leadership and interpersonal style. The idea is to provide you with detailed feedback to guide your career. You attend a two-day training session where you're given your personal results and then, along with 20 other attendees, a trainer advises you on techniques to improve your lower scores.

This particular developmental tool was invented decades ago as a means of putting teeth into leadership training. Prior to the 360° assessment, leaders reluctantly attended training and then denied that they needed to change anything. However, when you interviewed people who worked with them, many thought they needed to change—a lot. Voila, enter the scientific survey. Now you have a powerful tool that provides undeniable feedback from the people who know them the best. Who better to both inform and motivate leaders to change than their colleagues?

What Happened to Leo

When I first heard of this tool, I immediately signed up Leo, an engineering manager. Those who worked for and around Leo found his influence style enormously abrasive, threatening, and unhealthy. Unfortunately, Leo thought he was nearly perfect and didn't see the need to change.

Leo, eagerly attended the 360° training course. He sat in the front row and agreed with everything the trainers talked about. Leaders need to be firm but fair, approachable but not easy, detailed without micromanaging. In short, Leo thought leaders needed to be just like him.

At the end of the first day, Leo was given his survey results. People who knew him despised his interaction style so much that they broke the 1

to 5 grading scale by writing in zeros and negative numbers—just to punctuate their disdain. Their open-ended remarks were so vile that Leo was completely humiliated.

The next morning Leo returned to the training a broken man. He met with well-intentioned coaches who eagerly advised him on steps to improve his abysmal scores. But Leo was irreconcilable. In a matter of minutes, the undeniable data took Leo from a belief that he was a good leader to the reality that he was horrible at his job.

When Leo returned to work, there was no changing his mind. The gifted engineer had decided to return to his former cubicle and hang up his leadership job where “he could do no damage to others.” And that's what Leo did. His direct reports cheered when Leo stepped down. I felt far less exuberant.

Why it Happened to Leo

As I poured over the survey questions Leo had been hammered with, I concluded that we had done Leo a disservice. Though Leo had earned the low numbers on his own, the survey offered him little hope. The questions focused on conclusions, not behaviors. They let Leo know what others felt about him, but didn't suggest one actionable thing that Leo routinely did to warrant the conclusions.

For instance, Leo's peers believed he was hard to approach. The survey question stated: "My boss is easy to approach" and Leo averaged a "strongly disagree" on this item. What wasn't clear to Leo was what he had done that led people to believe he was hard to approach. He could only guess. He kept his office door open. He talked to people when they entered. He tried his best to listen. But still, Leo was seen as hard to approach.

He was also "arrogant." Two people wrote this comment in the margins of the survey. Leo knew he was the best engineer in the department and thought believing so had made him confident, not arrogant. Being told he was arrogant was more confusing than informative and simply made him angry. Leo was also a micromanager, abrasive, and threatening. The list of negative adjectives only grew as Leo poured over his data. All were bad, all depressed him, and none told him a thing about what he routinely did that earned him the labels.

When I talked to the survey designers they argued that the instrument was only the starting point in the developmental process. Leo was supposed to look at the harsh conclusions and then ask his coworkers why they had made those conclusions. Then he could harvest to the nitty-gritty detail. Of course, there was always the likely risk that others wouldn't tell him to his face or that if they did try to give him feedback, they would simply swap one vague and conclusionary term for another. "I think you're arrogant, because, you're haughty and egotistical. That's it, you're egotistical."

Then again, there was also the risk that upon receiving the bad news about his leadership style, Leo would search out who said those nasty things about him, argue the point, or maybe even seek revenge.

Lessons Learned from Leo

This survey tool that sounds so clever on its face is wrought with potential risks. Just ask Leo and his direct reports. If you've invested both time and money in similar survey tools, you may have experienced similarly unfavorable results. Here's how you should invest your money instead.

Only use survey tools that focus on behaviors. Instead of asking questions like, "Leo offers support," identify a supportive behavior that is both recognizable and replicable. A good test of these defining factors is that the person could do it either right away or after training. For instance, a question that focuses on behavior would look like this: "When others become defensive, he or she goes out of his or her way to stop and clarify possible misunderstandings."

So, read each question on the survey and ask: "Does this focus on a specific behavior? If so, could I or others do it or be trained in it?" If not, you are only confusing and intimidating participants.

Link behaviors to desired results. Always make sure the behaviors you're measuring are high-leverage actions that, if enacted, yield the results you want. To make sure that you're measuring high-leverage

behaviors, insist that the survey tool be based on the actions of highly effective individuals who routinely model best practices.

Link survey questions to high-leverage training. It's important to link each survey question to training that not only teaches high-leverage behaviors but also provides opportunities to practice the behavior until the participant becomes confident and skilled. The correct process is as follows:

1. Measure high-leverage behaviors
2. Provide 360° feedback about participant's current skill level
3. Teach the skill associated with each behavior
4. Practice that skill until the participants can do it easily

Allow participants the chance to implement their new skills at work. If you expect any survey tool to be part of a developmental process, you need to give people the opportunity to progress. Then, after participants have been given a chance to add the new high-leverage skills to their performance repertoire, measure them again.

We call this second measure a 720° tool because it's a complete 360° view offered twice. This tool gives participants an opportunity to see if their changes in behavior have taken effect. After taking the second measure participants can revisit areas that haven't yet shown improvement and practice them more vigilantly or work harder to bring them into play. They can also celebrate improvements and take care to see that they continue their more positive behaviors in the future.

So, if you're looking to maximize your investment in a 360° survey process, insist on behaviorally anchored 720° survey tool that measures what people do, not merely what others think about them. Focus only on skills that are part of an overall best-practices package. Provide training and practice for each behavior you measure. Finally, measure twice to give people a chance to assess their improvements as well point out where they'll need to continue to work. Anything less only confuses participants with vague conclusions, focuses on trivial actions, offers little hope, demands that people provide their own improvement techniques and skills, provides no chance to show growth, and—as was true with Leo—can do more damage than good.

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