

Effective integration of 360 degree feedback into the coaching process

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This practical paper is based on a skills session as delivered at the British Psychological Society's Special Group in Coaching Psychology Conference 2007 held in London. The first part of our paper provides a review of the extant research evidence on 360 degree feedback with focus on effects on individual development, making explicit links to the implications for coaching practice throughout. We conclude that 360 degree feedback is primarily effective when conceptualised and utilised as a finely grained means of instigating individual behaviour change and learning on job relevant attributes and facilitated by a skilled feedback giver. This provides a clear rationale for its use in coaching. We outline how an actual profile can be used as part of a coaching session, using the Saville Work Wave® Performance 360 as an example.

Keywords: 360 degree feedback, self-awareness, individual development, blind spots, proficiency, feedback conditions, potential, aptitude, personality, styles, Saville Consulting Wave®.

Introduction to feedback processes

ESSENTIALLY, the term 'Feedback' stems from communications theory and refers to a process where a 'sender', relays a 'message' which is some information, to a 'recipient' (McDowall, 2008). This basic process is common to all feedback activities and is outlined in Figure 1 (overleaf).

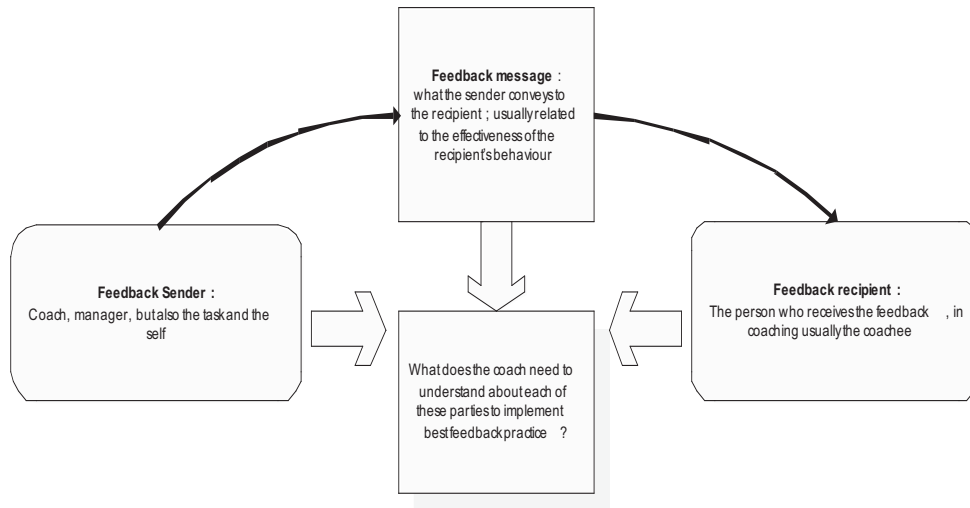
Feedback processes can take various forms in interpersonal processes, as it can be delivered either orally, written or in electronic form. Feedback can also originate from the 'self', as cognitive and affective processes provide us with information about how any task that we are involved in is progressing (for a full review see Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). In fact, structured 'self-assessment' is at the heart of most multi-rater feedback processes, which we discuss below both in terms of the extant research literature but also the practical implications. In addition, feedback will also originate from any given task itself, which may provide signals of frustration, boredom, enjoyment and so on.

Kluger and DeNisi (1996) integrated these aspects into a Feedback Intervention Theory [FIT] which generated a number of

testable propositions that urged researchers to consider a complex array of factors in future research and practice. Feedback is also a crucial element of self-regulatory theories of human motivation such as control theory (see Carver & Scheier, 1981) as it allows us to evaluate what we should do or avoid in relation to our internal goals and standards. We cannot assume, however, that feedback will always have positive effects, as many examples exist to the contrary. A case in point is the dissatisfaction with contemporary appraisal processes in organisations (e.g. Jones, 2007). In a similar vein Thorndike (cited in Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) noted as early as 1913 that giving feedback by the means of grades to students changed their focus from wanting to learn to the mark obtained.

Contemporary research has followed on from this to corroborate that a focus on performance (i.e. 'marks') as opposed to mastery (i.e. learning) can be detrimental to performance. This has clear implications for practice as formative feedback, focused on improvement and the future, is infinitely

Figure 1: The Feedback process.



more conducive than summative feedback focused on past performance. We will return to this aspect when discussing the implication for practice in the last section. Next, we will outline the rationale and research evidence for multi-source feedback processes in detail.

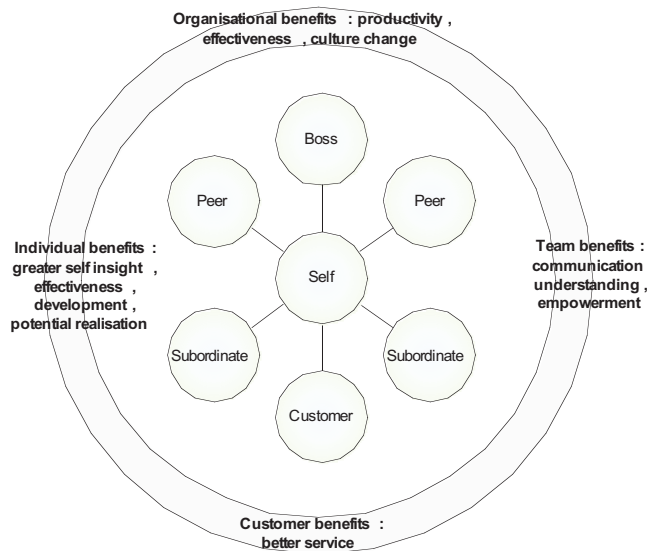
360 degree feedback – its rationale and research evidence

A fairly comprehensive body of evidence on feedback in an organisational context stems from studies on multi-source-multi-rater (MSMR) or 360 degree feedback (McDowall, 2008). This entails the planned comparison of ratings from various sources, such as the supervisor, subordinates, peers and also occasionally internal and external customers, on agreed work-based performance dimensions and interpersonal aspects. Numerous 360 degree feedback tools can be bought 'off the shelf' (akin to psychometric tests albeit with greater variations in psychometric quality). Examples are profiles that are based on transformational models of leadership such as the MLQ (Avolio et al.,

1995) or the TLQ (now ELQ, Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2001, 2008). At the other extreme of a continuum are bespoke tools that are typically based on an organisation's competency framework. In between are 'half-way house' tools that allow limited customisation of existing items or scales against a local framework. Reports are almost always generated through a computer system. They typically contain graphs, usually bar charts, that show the ratings from various parties on different dimensions and may include structured narratives or free flowing comments. There was a temporary backlash against this emphasis on numerical information some time ago as some people objected to creating such a distinct and possibly unhealthy emphasis on performance and summative grading. A relatively recent study, however, shows that managers in fact prefer this format to narrative and potentially more formatively orientated information (Atwater & Brett, 2006).

The process of 360 degree feedback typically commences with a recipient self-assessment on a set of items. Other raters are

Figure 2: The 360 degree feedback process and purported benefits.



nominated to complete the same items (or sometimes a sub-set). The 'other' raters will typically include the immediate superior or boss, peers, subordinates and occasionally also internal or external customers (see Figure 2) or other stakeholders. Feedback givers can be recruited in various ways. In contexts where emphasis is put on formal summative ratings, the organisation, or its representatives tend to specify the other raters. Where the focus is on formative development, the focal individual will chose the other raters.

When 360 degree feedback first emerged, great hopes rested on this innovative process, where beneficial outcomes as depicted in Figure 2 were expected at different levels. Multi-source feedback was purported to enhance individual effectiveness and learning, facilitate culture change and increase effectiveness at a wider team and organisational level which ultimately would result in better services to customers.

The purpose of the actual feedback process (which should be conducted by a trained professional) is to assess and evaluate

how any gaps between different ratings may have arisen and to explore them with the focal individual. According to McDowall (2008) effective 360 degree feedback should at the very least meet the following conditions:

- (a) It should provide a comprehensive and valid measure of workplace behaviour.
- (b) The learning through feedback from different sources should prompt people to change, and engage in relevant follow up development activities.
- (c) Feedback from each source will provide valuable information in its own right.

We will now briefly review existing literature from major occupational psychology journals to ascertain to what extent the above conditions are met in practice focusing on the individual level. We omit a wider discussion of purported benefits at the team and organisational level to focus on evidence relevant to coaches.

Accuracy of ratings and 360 tools

Multiple raters should in theory provide more accurate information than singular ratings as a combination from various

sources should serve to cancel out any individual bias. Fletcher and Baldry (1999) point out that this may not necessarily be the case especially if reward decisions such as promotions, bonuses or pay-rises are contingent on ratings. To assure quality Fletcher et al. (1998) suggest that 360 measures should be scrutinised and tested just like any other psychometric tool to increase confidence that the results will hold up across time or across employees, and they in fact measure what the organisation had intended to measure. In our own practice, we have used Fletcher et al.'s method to scrutinise existing 360 data sets, and have come to similar conclusions in different contexts: (a) that individual items often show poor discrimination (everybody gives similar ratings); (b) that items may not be measuring the competency that they have been assigned to; and (c) that instruments generally are over-long due to a number of redundant items. Coaches need to bear this in mind when deciding about which tools to use in their own practice or when interpreting a pre-existing profile. McDowall and Kurz (2007) put forward that psychometric tools can be judged effectively by their adherence to psychometric principles (are instruments reliable and consistent, do they measure what they set out to measure, is an appropriate point of comparison available, are they free from bias against certain groups). This also applies to multi-source feedback tools. We have summarised a 360 quality check for coaches in Table 1.

360 and individual development

360 degree feedback offers the unique opportunity to compare ratings from different sources against how people rate themselves providing an indication of effectiveness at work. The size and direction of the gaps between self- and other ratings indicate pressure points where dialogue could facilitate development. The evidence suggests that individuals who are self-aware, in other words able to rate their respective strengths and weaknesses in the same way

that other people rate them, perform optimally in the workplace (e.g. Bass & Yammarino, 1991; Yammarino & Atwater, 1993). Yammarino and Atwater (1997) put forward four categories of agreement:

- In Agreement – Good (high ratings from self and other).
- In Agreement – Poor (low ratings from self and other).
- Under-rater (low ratings from self, high ratings from others).
- Over-rater (high ratings from self, low ratings from others).

Evidence suggests that Over-raters tend to ignore criticism and discount failure (Bass & Yammarino, 1991) and poor performance outcomes are predicted for 'In Agreement – Poor' raters who according to the model have not addressed any shortcomings. However, self-awareness can be conceptualised as a state (transient) rather than a trait. Evidence shows that Over-raters demonstrate the highest levels of improvement following 360 feedback (Atwater et al., 1995). This is important to note for the use of 360 in coaching. Very different questioning and interview strategies may be required for an Over-rater, who at first might be inclined to disregard the information contained in the feedback profile than for an Under-rater who may lack self-confidence. Profiles that include actual comments from raters are helpful in this instance, as these provide additional evidence that can feed into the coaching process.

In all, the rationale for using 360 at the individual level is to raise or corroborate people's level of self-awareness through feedback from different sources (McDowall, 2008). However, not all feedback information is attended to equally. The credibility and the rank of the feedback source matter, as feedback from the boss generally has the greatest impact (Bailey & Fletcher, 2002; Gregura et al., 2003). Peer ratings appear to vary considerably across time (Bailey & Fletcher, 2002). Reports often focus more on the pleasantness than the effectiveness of their boss. Coaches need to bear these

Table 1: Checking 360 degree feedback quality.

Level of Analysis	Questions about the Tool	Who provides the Information
The tool itself	Is there any information available about: Reliability? Validity? Comparison groups?	Tool publishers, or organisation (for bespoke tool).
The job or role	Which of the 360 dimensions are crucial to the focal individual's job or role?	This needs to be done through job analysis, key consultation or tools such as the job profiler.
The individual	Is the information as presented in the profile correct? Which of the rater categories as explained above does the focal individual pertain to? Do they over-, or under-rate? How can gaps between self- and other ratings be explained? What has been learned from the discussion of the profile? How can this be taken forward?	Feedback discussion(s) between feedback giver (e.g. coach) and feedback recipient (focal individual).
The team	Is there any evidence that use of 360 degree feedback results in better communication, teamwork, etc.? Are there any issues that need to be targeted specifically? Is this backed up by aggregation of different profiles?	The organisation, e.g. commissioning managers.
The organisation	Is use of 360 linked to improved outcomes at the organisational level, such as productivity, satisfaction, turnover, participation in training and development? Should any of the above provide focus for the coaching process(es)?	The organisation, test publisher or independent researchers undertaking validation studies.

multiple stakeholder perspectives in mind when interpreting differences in ratings from various sources. As boss's ratings tend to be weighed heavier by focal individuals, this could be used to good advantage for Over-raters, as criticism from this source is more likely to be accepted and acted upon.

Will 360 degree feedback achieve lasting impact? An early study (Hazucha et al., 1993) found that self-awareness increased following participation in 360 degree feedback, and that this in turn was related to

career progress. Engagement in follow-up activities was contingent on support from supervisors where those who felt supported put more effort into their development and engaged in more development activities.

The association between 360 degree feedback ratings and follow-up developmental activities tends to be small (Maurer et al., 2002). A thorough review also found the link between feedback ratings (both from traditional appraisals and multiple sources) and performance improvements to be negli-

gible (Smither et al., 2005). Effectiveness improves, however, if the initial feedback process is followed up and supported by executive coaching, where notably better performance evaluations are observed as well as the setting and follow through of concrete goals (Smither et al., 2003). As reported in McDowall (2008) this also applies outside the workplace in education (Marsh & Roche, 1997). Taken together, these results indicate that coaching is helpful for initiating and embedding behaviour change following the initial feedback process. These findings can be explained in the light of existing psychological theories of motivation. Goal setting theory holds that individuals are more motivated to initiate and sustain behaviour if difficult but achievable goals are set (for a full review see Latham, 2006). Whilst goal setting theories are primarily concerned with how cognitive resources are energised and attention is focused and sustained, control theory (Carver & Scheier, 1981) takes a socio-cognitive perspective. Individuals compare their own internal goals against standards set by others and strive to match these, which could be feedback ratings in the case of 360 processes.

According to control theory, three conditions have to be met for individuals to adjust their behaviour. First, individuals must have a goal or goals they are striving towards. In the case of 360 degree feedback, these could be general goals such as wanting to improve the quality of working life, or specific goals such as improving particular aspects of competence (e.g. improving communication in team work). Secondly, people must recognise that certain aspects of their current behaviour are not in line with these goals. Lastly, they must be willing and able to adjust their behaviour to meet these goals.

The basic tenets of control theory are helpful when working with clients and 360 feedback profiles in coaching practice as they can be communicated openly to a coachee. As coachees may or may not agree with the feedback received from others (and

the level of agreement), it is important to convey that such information is essential for the proactive regulation of our behaviour. This is empowering for coaches, as control theory presupposes human agency and thus places the 'ball back in the court of the coachee' for controlling behavioural changes. It also fosters positive self-beliefs which are crucial for 360 feedback effectiveness (Maurer et al., 2002; Atwater & Brett, 2005). In addition, it is important that people react positively to the feedback process (Antonioni, 1996; Atwater & Brett, 2005) as a negative attitude makes people reluctant to change.

For the above reasons, it is important that 360 processes are communicated well and buy in is sought from everyone involved. Mutual trust needs to be fostered. Without trust, attitudes to the process are likely to be defensive and negative, and may also result in distorted ratings. To this extent, it is important that the overall purpose of the process is clearly agreed upfront. Whilst in the US 360 ratings may feed into organisational decisions such as promotions or rewards, in the UK use is largely limited to developmental purposes, and many authors would recommend this as best practice (see Fletcher & Baldry, 1999). Where 360 degree process is implemented with care, managers value its thoroughness (Mabey, 2001), and particularly appreciate the detailed graphical and numerical information that is usually detailed in the reports (Atwater & Brett, 2006).

One issue that is generally problematic both in 360 degree feedback but also in appraisal is the question of who is actually best placed to rate other people's performance. For instance, line or senior managers may have little idea of what an individual actually does on a day-to-day basis. Thus, one study found that behaviour change as measured by comparison of 360 degree ratings over time was more closely related to initial self-assessments than initial ratings from other sources (Bailey & Austin, 2006). This finding suggests that we should give as much

attention to self-evaluations as to ratings from other sources, and that we should look at underlying trait measures to explore the reasons for performance issues.

Saville Consulting Wave® Performance 360

As discussed above, the use of 360 tools in coaching is particularly helpful where reliable evidence from the actual work context is required. 'Whilst managers who don't want to hear' might brush off the discussion of a traditional personality profile or intelligence test yet evidence gathered from various sources in the workplace is much harder to ignore.

To measure underlying potential trait measures can identify stable personality characteristics through self report questionnaires and abilities through aptitude tests. Traditional personality measures focus on how people differ from each other on behaviour, behavioural preferences or characteristics that effect their behaviours, but unlike aptitude tests without indicating whether there is a positive or negative impact on work effectiveness of this difference. The lack of validated links between traditional personality dimensions and performance criteria hence hampers an analysis of the gap between potential and performance.

This is where robust instruments that are based on cutting edge psychological research are of particular merit and can contribute valuable information to coach and coachee alike as a sound 360 tool will allow performance and potential to be unraveled in fine granularity.

Saville Consulting tools have been built specifically to predict and measure work performance based on the design principle of a 'matched model' where trait predictors and work performance criteria are structurally aligned spanning an assessment continuum that ranges from dispositional trait measures to work competency measures.

The Saville Consulting Wave® Performance 360 tool measures performance through self and other ratings on inventories

featuring 36 Behaviour items, six Ability and three Global Performance items that are each rated on a seven-point effectiveness scale. It derives from the initial Validation Player instrument used by MacIver et al. (2007) in the development of Saville Consulting Wave to validate a pool of 214 facet scales against empirical criteria of job performance and potential.

The relevance of the same behavioural, ability and global performance areas can be measured through the companion Importance 360 or Job Profiler multi-rater tools. Potential for each area can be predicted from related personality, aptitude and competence attributes.

In Saville Consulting Wave® model Performance 360 competency dimensions and styles assessments are structurally aligned and psychometrically linked through Competency Potential equations that draw on a broader range of valid facets to optimise the empirical prediction through variables outside the matched model. Figure 3 shows Performance 360 dimensions (Figure 3a), line manager friendly Competency Potential outputs that predict these dimensions (Figure 3b) and the matched model counterparts in the Wave Styles questionnaire (Figure 3c) that enables expert users 'Deep Dive' analysis of Facet Ranges, Normative-Ipsative Splits and Motive-Talent Splits as described in Kurz et al. (2008). For example, the Performance 360 criterion dimension of Generating Ideas is predicted by the Professional Styles Competency Potential score with the same name that in turn is based primarily on the Inventive styles dimension combined with four other facets that boost validity.

MacIver et al. (2006) showed excellent point-to-point prediction of the 36 Behaviour dimensions averaging .21 (.39 corrected) for styles and .25 (.46) for the 'validity-tuned' competency potential dimensions.

Understanding abilities in the work place requires a terminology to assess key capabilities as well as validated links to underlying

Figure 3a: Saville Consulting Wave® Performance 360 Criterion Dimensions with Boss, Self, Peer and Report Markers containing Sten values plotted against Inventory Rating Scale.

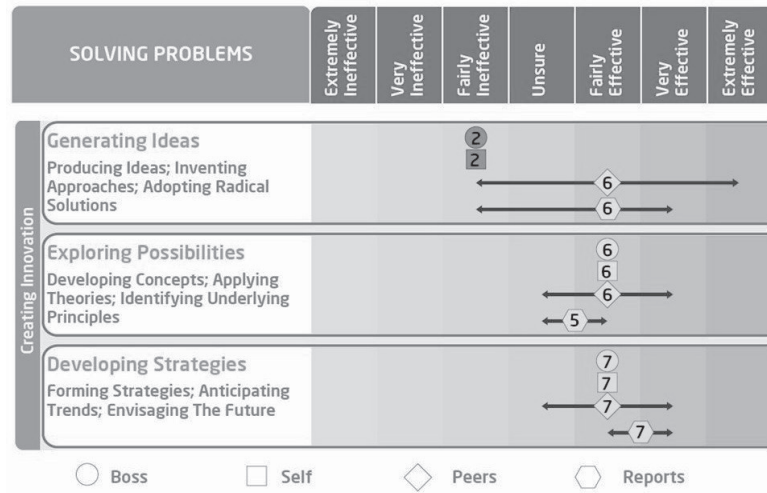


Figure 3b: Saville Consulting Wave® Competency Potential Section with Section Graph and Dimension Sten Scores.

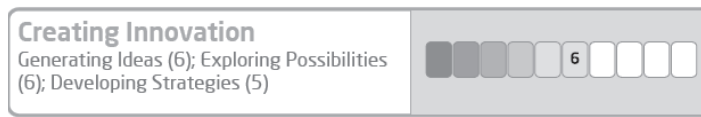
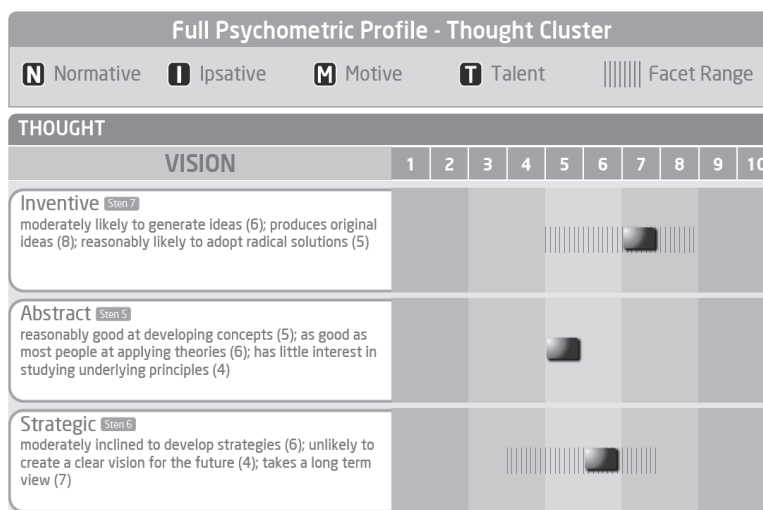


Figure 3c: Saville Consulting Wave® Professional Styles Dimension Stens.



apptitude areas. In the course of the standardisation of Professional Aptitudes individuals were asked to rate themselves on a number of matched ability dimensions. Table 2 shows a good correspondence between aptitude predictor and ability criterion data which in turn enables meaningful gap analysis to identify cognitive strengths or limitations that may help to understand performance issues.

Finally, global measures of overall performance effectiveness were developed that assess contextual performance independently of the Behaviour and Ability model in Saville Consulting Wave following on from the validation work of Nyfield et al. (1995) who pioneered the use of job proficiency and promotability criterion scales. Kurz and Bartram (2002) built on their research to create the Great Eight competencies that are used in the SHL Corporate Leadership model (Bartram, 2002). Bartram (2005) showed high validity for the Occupational Personality Questionnaire in the prediction of job performance using the Great Eight to aggregate predictor and criterion scales.

Table 3 shows results of a study where the performance of $N=169$ managers who completed OPQ32i and Professional Styles were rated on three items reflecting global aspects of performance related to Expertise, Accomplishment and Potential. Unit weight Great Eight composite scores were calculated and aggregated into trait scores and competency potential scores for Professional Styles and Corporate Leadership scores for OPQ32i. All three total scores were strong at predicting Demonstrating Potential but weak for Applying Specialist Expertise where ability measures may be more potent. Professional Styles clearly improved on the prediction offered by the well-established OPQ32i tool in this co-validation sample of respectable size.

In summary the Saville Consulting Wave approach enables investigation of dispositional and situational variables to explain the full complexity of job and contextual performance in the workplace as viewed from 360 stakeholder perspectives.

Table 2: Professional Aptitudes test validities against Educational (GCSE Points; $N=227$), Competency Self-Assessment ($N=263$) and Overall Performance Self-rating ($N=263$) criteria.

	GCSE Points	Thinking Competency	Working with Words	Working with Numbers	Working with Diagrams	Overall Performance
Verbal Analysis	.50	.16	.30	.15	.16	.20
Numerical Analysis	.46	.32	.18	.44	.32	.21
Diagrammatic Analysis	.39	.22	.01	.18	.23	.08

Table 3: Co-validation Prediction of Global Performance through Occupational Personality Questionnaire and Professional Styles 'Great 8' Scores (N=169).

Criterion	Applying Specialist Expertise	Accomplishing Objectives	Demonstrating Potential	Global Performance (sum of 3 items)
Predictor				
OPQ32i Corporate Leadership Score	-.04	.07	.17*	.09
Professional Styles Trait Score	.04	.24**	.22**	.21**
Professional Styles Competency Potential Score	.08	.26**	.27**	.26**

Using 360 Feedback Profiles in Coaching: Case Study 'Jo'

We would now like to guide our reader on how to use such feedback ratings as part of a coaching session by discussing the excerpt depicted in Figure 3.

At the outset, a coach using 360 needs to undertake 'a priori investigations' about which 360 dimensions or scales are relevant to the coachee's job. Such information should ideally be based on some sort of job analysis data or at the very least a consultation with key people in the coachee's organisation. This process can be much facilitated through online tools that allow job profiling (see Table 1 for the 360 effectiveness check).

Once this has been established, interpretation of the profile and differing ratings can be done in the light of the role. The focal individual here is 'Jo' who is a senior project manager in a start-up business unit of a major technology company. Importance 360 feedback suggested that the focus of this role is on effective management of the task, rather than strategic innovation.

The data presented on the right-hand-side of Figure 3a is based on ratings by the feedback recipient and nominated others on the 'Creating Innovation' Section in the 'Solving Problems' cluster that corresponds to the 'Thought' cluster in the Styles model. For 'Generating Ideas' self and boss ratings

are both in the Fairly Ineffective band. Peer and report ratings vary but aggregate ratings are on average considerably higher. Several potential interpretations are possible and these would need to be corroborated in a feedback session.

First, the coach needs to go back to the earlier investigation of whether this particular aspect is core to the feedback recipient's job, and thus needs to be addressed at all, or with varying degrees of priority. If the Generating Ideas dimension was central to the role and a coach-facilitated feedback session it would be of paramount importance to get to the bottom of the differences across the four rater groups. In the present context, this is less of an issue as Jo's current role is to chase highly imaginative technologists to complete their projects to externally agreed deadlines.

It is possible that there are different possible explanations for the patterns in the ratings, so it is important that the coach keeps an open mind and explores various alternative 'hypotheses'. Here, it is tenable that both the manager and Jo see Generating Ideas as unrelated to the focal job role, and both view this as 'In Agreement – Poor'. Feedback interview questions might include 'In what way is coming up with new ideas core to your job?', 'Could you give me some concrete examples where you were expected to generate ideas?', 'What stops you from

coming up with new ideas, and what helps?’ In contrast, peer and report raters might find Jo an inspirational source of ideas on how to manage projects more effectively, and thus perceive her performance as fairly effective, hence the difference in ratings. The other raters have then actually observed relevant and effective behaviours, which are not salient to Jo or her manager as they might be focused on a more narrow understanding of this behavioural domain or benchmark her against highly imaginative technologists. In this instance, it can be helpful to bring circular questions into the 360 interview (asking how behaviours might be perceived by others, and what the effect on others might be), to encourage Jo to widen her own perspective.

An alternative hypothesis is that Jo may be an ‘Under-rater’ who self-rates performance as lower than others, but actually performs effectively. This could be coupled with a lack of self-confidence, which might be central to understanding the boss’s ratings which are also low. If there is a lack of confidence, effective behaviours might not be salient to others such as the boss, or underplayed by the feedback recipient. In this instance, coaches would need to take care to question Jo particularly sensitively, first focusing on effectiveness in the workplace, then shifting the focus to how confidence and self-esteem could effectively be nurtured and supported. The coach could explore further by bringing in motives and talent from a styles assessment.

It is possible that an observed difference between these could provide the coach with further prompts as to whether an individual is realising their full potential with regards to Generating Ideas but also how Jo might be adapting to pressures in the workplace. The gap analysis between potential and performance 360 rating will help to establish whether the person or the environment/situations should be developed, and how difficult such a change is likely to be.

Taking the last example of Jo holding a senior project management role in a tech-

nology consultancy, one hypothesis for exploration holds that Jo is capable of creating innovation, but due to the pressures of the consultancy environment performs at less than optimal level. When this styles assessment is used alongside the Performance 360 report it allows an understanding of the degree to which an individual is fulfilling their potential in performance terms. This further exploration can generate greater insight into potential reasons for the differences in the effectiveness ratings on Performance 360.

If Jo were to be considered for promotion to a more senior role we should look at her styles results that suggest moderate competency potential for Generating Ideas, and a rather strong inclination to generate original ideas. In a more challenging role where creativity is called for Jo has fairly high potential for success. Aptitude assessment results of Jo actually were above average for five of the six areas.

Returning back to our earlier proposition that self-regulation is key to understanding 360 effectiveness, the coach may need to decide how best to facilitate this. For instance, it can be important in which order psychometrics are discussed with the coachee. As 360 output is typically conceptualized as a criterion measure, it can be helpful to present this to coaches first to help in the formulation of discrete goals, before any ‘predictor evidence’ (such as aptitudes, motives and talents) is used in subsequent sessions to work out exactly how such goals could be achieved.

Conclusion

We conclude that 360 degree feedback measures make an effective contribution to the coaching process, as differences in ratings provide both the coachee and the coach with valuable information about levels of effective performance at work. It is essential however, that the tool itself has undergone thorough psychometric validation and thus offers reliable and robust information. Where this is achieved 360 data provides the coach with a

sound model for exploring accuracy of information and levels of self-insight and confidence with their coachees. It is essential that coach and coachee understand this in the context of the requirements of a particular role, and have some indication of how focal individuals can realise their potential. In summary, 360 may provide a very finely grained measure of performance which provides structure and robustness to the coaching process, and can be used to even greater effectiveness when coupled with aptitude, motives and talent measures of potential.

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Multimodal coaching and its application to workplace, life and health coaching

Stephen Palmer

This article highlights how the multimodal approach (Lazarus, 1989) has been adapted to the field of coaching and coaching psychology. It covers the basic theories underpinning the multimodal approach and illustrates the link between the theory and practice. Key multimodal strategies are covered including modality profiles, structural profiles, tracking and bridging.

Keywords: multimodal coaching and therapy, workplace coaching, health coaching, Arnold Lazarus, modality profiles, structural profiles, tracking, bridging.

Development of the multimodal approach

THE MULTIMODAL APPROACH was developed by a psychologist, Arnold Lazarus (1989, 1997) in the 1970s. He believed that no one system of therapy could provide a complete understanding of either human development or condition. By following-up counselling clients who had received behaviour therapy he found that many of them had relapsed. He noted that when clients had used both behaviour and cognitive techniques more durable outcomes were obtained. Hence he started using a broad range of cognitive-behavioural techniques applied systematically and finally this led to the development of Multimodal Therapy which focuses on seven discrete but interactive dimensions or modalities which encompass all aspects of human personality (Lazarus 1971, 1973).

The multimodal approach has been adapted and applied to executive coaching (Richards, 1999), personal/life coaching, stress management and health coaching (Palmer, 2003; Palmer et al., 2003; Palmer & Gyllensten, 2008). It pre-dates cognitive-behavioural models such as SPACE (Edgerton & Palmer, 2005). Successive surveys of coaching psychologists have found that about 10 per cent of respondents use multimodal coaching (see Whybrow & Palmer, 2006a, b; Palmer & Whybrow, 2004, 2007).

Basic theory and practice

The Multimodal approach is underpinned by a broad social and cognitive learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986), although it also uses group and communications theory and general systems theory as necessary (Lazarus, 1989). It assumes that people are:

‘essentially biological organisms (neurophysiological/biochemical entities) who behave (act and react), emote (experience affective responses), sense (respond to olfactory, tactile, gustatory, visual and auditory stimuli), imagine (conjure up sights, sounds and other events in the mind’s eye), think (hold beliefs, opinions, attitudes and values), and interact with one another (tolerate, enjoy or suffer in various interpersonal relationships). These dimensions of personality are usually known by the acronym, BASIC I.D. derived from the first letters of each modality, namely Behaviour, Affect, Sensations, Images, Cognitions, Interpersonal and Drugs/biology (Palmer, 2006, pp.322–323).

The BASIC I.D. modalities often interact with each other and may exist in a state of reciprocal transaction. For example, an **Image** in one’s mind of performing badly at work could trigger a **Cognition** ‘I’m a failure’ which could subsequently lead to an **Affect** (emotion) of depression.

Coachees presenting a number of issues or problems for coaching may need a range of strategies and techniques to deal with