Receiving Feedback

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Introduction

I recently had a conversation with a senior Vice President in a major pharmaceutical company who had never received 360° feedback. It had been recommended a few times throughout his career, but he had refused to have one done. I wondered why… Was it because he didn't think he needed it? Or he didn't care what others thought? Or was he secretly afraid to find out what others thought of his performance?

Refusing a 360 isn't going to change what others think. They're thinking it anyway…you might as well know! There's a "word on the street" about all of us. It's what people say behind our backs when we leave the room. You have to know what that is or you can't effectively market yourself. 360° feedback is a great opportunity to find out what your colleagues, employees, customers, and clients think about your leadership skills.

Unfortunately, we often think we are doing better as leaders than others think we are doing. Our self-ratings tend to be inflated compared to ratings by others. And face-to-face feedback is typically more positive, so anonymous 360° feedback can point out some surprising shortcomings.

Ratings from a wide variety of sources can be helpful in bringing key issues to light. **But it takes a brave person with strong character to be willing to look at themselves from all angles!** If you are reading this article, it means you have committed to take (or have already taken) the Leader 360 assessment. That makes you one of those brave people with strong character! You welcome feedback about your leadership in a constant effort to learn and improve.

Some leaders end up pleased with the results of their 360° feedback. Others are shocked and angry at the responses. **This article is essential in**

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preparing you to receive the feedback. Trained leadership coaches, like myself, can ease any apprehension and help you to evaluate the reality of the results without dismissing them or becoming defensive.

> **360° Feedback:**
>
> - is powerful, valid information
> - will help you consider your strengths as well as your weaknesses
> - is based on others' perceptions – but those perceptions are based in *their reality*, so carefully consider how they developed

All too often, people respond to feedback by either ignoring it (and hoping it will go away) or brushing it off by saying, "That's just one person's opinion." Perception is reality. People don't know your intentions; they only see your behavior. You can explain or justify your behavior, but it doesn't solve the problem of not meeting someone else's expectations.

After receiving your feedback:

- Take your time and carefully consider all the results. Don't react too quickly. "Sleep" on it.
- Decide what information is most relevant to you
- Determine what, if anything, you want to do to change the perceptions of others

It is important to understand that feedback is an essential tool that effective leaders use to develop themselves. In many ways, 360° measures are just a more comprehensive method for accomplishing what should occur on a regular day-to-day basis (e.g., gathering feedback). **Proactive** leaders regularly seek feedback from others as a foundation for **continuous growth and improvement.**

The Purpose of 360° Feedback

Raising Self-Awareness

The primary purpose of 360° feedback is to help leaders raise self-awareness and eliminate self-defeating patterns of behavior. Feedback from others can give us information as to what's working and what's not working. It gives us information about how other people experience our actions. We can use this information to make continual changes and get better at what we do. Without feedback, we would live in a vacuum, at risk of repeating the same mistakes over and over.

Self-awareness cannot be thought of as frivolous "soft science." It is absolutely critical to your future success. The starting point of every rehabilitation program is being self-aware enough to admit when you have a problem. It is the same with personal and professional leadership development.

Without self-awareness, you cannot understand your **strengths** (e.g., your "super powers") and your **weaknesses** (e.g., your "kryptonite").
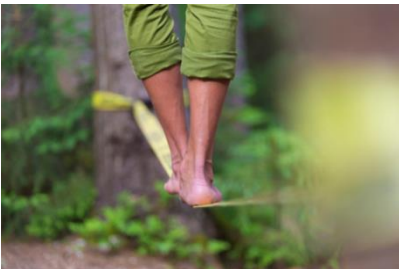
Acute self-awareness allows the best leaders to walk the tightrope of effectiveness – projecting confidence and conviction – while simultaneously remaining humble enough to hear new ideas and opposing opinions.
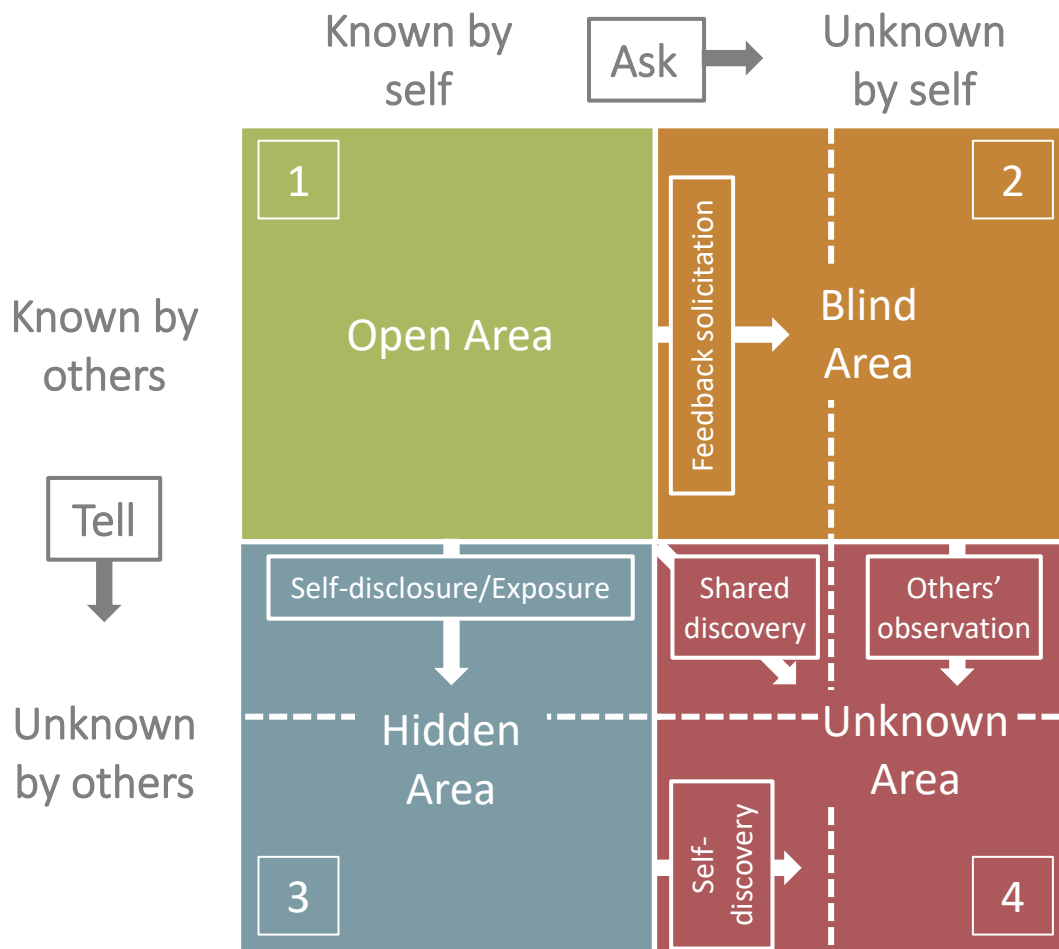
Feedback is useful for telling us "where we are." As a coach, I couldn't work with my clients without feedback. I wouldn't know what everyone thinks my client needs to change. Likewise, without feedback, we wouldn't have results. We couldn't keep score. We wouldn't know if we were getting better or worse. We need feedback to see where we are, where we need to go, and to measure our progress.

The Johari Window

The Johari Window model is a simple and useful tool for illustrating and improving self-awareness. The model was developed by American psychologists Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham in 1955 while researching group dynamics at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Similar to other behavioral models, the Johari Window is based on a four-square grid (like a window with four panes). Below is an example of how the Johari Window is normally shown, with four regions. This is the standard representation of the Johari Window model, with each quadrant the exact same size.

Known by self   Ask ➡   Unknown by self

Known by others

Tell

Unknown by others

1 Open Area	Feedback solicitation ➡	2 Blind Area
Self-disclosure/Exposure ⬇	Shared discovery	Others' observation
3 Hidden Area	Self-discovery ➡	4 Unknown Area

The four quadrants are:

1. **Open Area (Quadrant 1)**

   This quadrant represents the things that you know about yourself, and the things that others know about you. This includes your behavior, knowledge, skills, attitudes, and "public" history.

2. **Blind Area (Quadrant 2)**

   This quadrant represents things about you that you aren't aware of, but that are known by others.

3. **Hidden Area (Quadrant 3)**

   This quadrant represents things that you know about yourself, but that others don't know.

4. **Unknown Area (Quadrant 4)**

   This last quadrant represents things that are unknown by you and unknown by others.

At first glance, the Johari Window may look like a complex tool, but it's actually very easy to understand with just a little effort. As such, it provides a visual reference that people can use to look at their own character, and it illustrates the importance of sharing, being open, and accepting feedback from others.
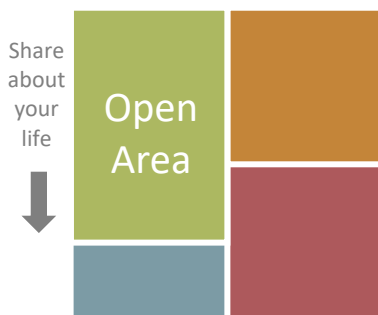
The Johari Window 'panes' can be changed in size to reflect the relevant proportions of each type of knowledge about you. In other words, the balance between the four quadrants can change. For example, you might decide to tell someone an aspect of your life that you had previously kept hidden. This would increase your open area and decrease your hidden area.

It is also possible to increase your open area by asking for feedback from other people. When honest feedback is given to you, it can reduce the size

Open Area

Open Area

Goal: Expand known categories
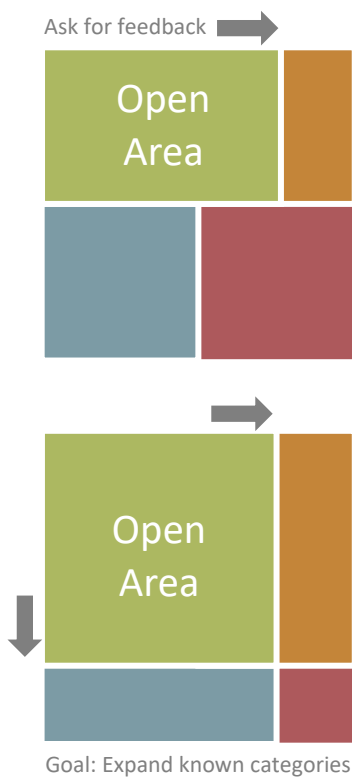
of your blind area. Perhaps you have a habit of interrupting people before they have finished making their point, which can cause frustration. Alternatively, people may enjoy talking to you because you are a good listener. Sometimes you don't realize these aspects of your character until they are pointed out. By receiving feedback from others, it is possible for you to discover aspects that you may never have appreciated before.

Eventually, the goal would be to expand all of the known categories, which will automatically reduce the unknown quadrant in the lower right-hand corner.

Reactions to 360° Feedback

In an effort to improve my own leadership coaching practice, I recently had a "master coach" listen to a recording of one of my sessions. I have to admit, I was a little apprehensive to get their feedback! I know there are some things I do well, but there is always room for improvement. It was helpful to have an objective person coach me through the feedback process and discuss how to make constructive changes moving forward.

Getting your own 360° feedback can be a scary process. Ratings generated from such a wide variety of sources can bring some surprising issues to light. I have found that some leaders are pleased with the results of their 360° feedback while others are shocked and angry. Some welcome feedback and positively ask for it, while others perceive it as a threat and start to defend themselves.

Research (and my own experience) indicates that feedback recipients progress through a predictable set of stages when they receive their ratings. These emotions are a natural process of receiving and understanding new information about yourself. Individuals vary on the duration and intensity they spend in each stage. I've worked with some clients that were completely open to the feedback and absorbed the content effortlessly,

while others experienced great difficulty processing their feedback and connecting it to their work life.

I like to use the following SARAH acronym to prepare my clients for the five phases they may go through when they receive their 360° feedback:

The SARAH Model

S = Shock
You may be shocked by your ratings because they are lower than you expected, very different from your own perceptions, or extremely varied across rater groups. Some surprises may be positive (e.g., unanticipated strengths), while others may be negative (e.g., blind spots).

A = Anger
Shock sometimes turns to anger and disappointment because you thought you were doing better than you were rated. There may be anger over the intensity and "toughness" of the data. Some feedback recipients may feel that respondents unfairly evaluated them.

It is important that you do not confront respondents about your data. Confronting respondents about your data negatively impacts leader credibility and can damage the integrity and anonymity of the process.

R = Rejection
While you are angry, you may search for ways to reject the feedback that was given, or reject the survey and the process entirely saying, "This is all meaningless!" This occurs when the feedback is perceived as a threat or taken personally. You may also reject the feedback because you believe, "I've always behaved this way, and look how far it's gotten me!" Try not to abandon ship at this point. Your raters intended for this feedback to assist you in becoming a better leader. Remind yourself that learning to receive

feedback effectively is a worthwhile skill that will enhance your career for years to come.

A = Acceptance

As you move past rejection, you usually get to a point where you can accept some of the ratings. A realization that the messages are "real" perceptions of your leadership performance allows you to begin developing a strategy to address those perceptions. Accepting the messages and identifying those that are actionable are the first steps in improving your leadership effectiveness.

H = Hope

The final phase is hope. At this stage, you find things you can accept and then determine a course for action. Once you have some course for action, there is always hope. This stage reflects your desire to address the issues raised in the feedback and begin leveraging your unique strengths and addressing any developmental opportunities.

One of my clients recently shared:

"I was in the **Anger** and **Rejection** stages last night, but after sleeping on it (or rather, losing some sleep over it!), I've begun to **Accept** my ratings."

I strongly recommend that you go through your results with a "feedback" mentor, HR representative, or private leadership coach to work through these five phases, assimilate the feedback, and make constructive changes in your behavior.

How to Interpret Your 360° Feedback Report

Feedback sets the stage for needed change, especially in how we work with others. But change can be difficult as we are usually very attached to our established patterns of behavior. Try to open your mind and realize that constructive change will help your career progression. Approaching your work in a new way can lead to positive outcomes.

What to Do with Your 360° Feedback

- **Do** accept the ratings as revealing how others perceive your leadership. Effective leaders have to manage others' perceptions as their reality.

- **Do** carefully examine how much your supervisor, direct reports, and colleagues differ from your own self-ratings. On a 5-point scale, a difference of less than .5 may be a matter of chance. Look for differences greater than .5.

- **Do** explore the reasons for any group/level differences in discussions with your supervisor, direct reports, and associates. Situations where ratings are widely divergent from one person to the next may indicate a different level of exposure or experience with you. It may also be due to how you treat or interact with different associates over time.

- **Do** look for items that differ significantly from other items within the same category/competency. Does this result make sense? Do you have control over these 'outlier' items or are they something you can't do anything about?

- **Do** look for your strong points as others see you. Are you in agreement with these?

- **Do** look for your weak points as others see you. Are you in agreement with these? Why or why not?

What NOT to Do with Your 360° Feedback

- **Don't** be surprised if your self-ratings differ considerably from others' ratings of you.
- **Don't** start by finding reasons to justify why you aren't being perceived as you would like.
- **Don't** be defensive and dismiss negative feedback as inaccurate or irrelevant.
- **Don't** put raters "on the spot" about their ratings, or give them the impression that you know what they may have said. Such behavior reduces confidentiality and undermines the whole process.
- **Don't** stop improving your leadership skills!

REFLECT

Share your feelings and thoughts about the feedback with someone you trust.

Decide what changes, if any, you might make.

Evaluate the consequences of changing or not changing these behaviors.

ASK

What might you be doing to create these perceptions?

Is it important to you to change these perceptions?

Are you willing to try to change these perceptions?

What specific actions will you do more or less of?

What are your ultimate objectives?

How will changing others' perceptions help you to accomplish your objectives?

You should develop a plan to increase/decrease specific behaviors identified in the feedback you received. Pick items that you believe will have the biggest effect on your overall average for a particular competency and where you can really see yourself committing to make a change. Choose a small step or one competency to focus on at a time.

Identifying realistic steps toward an improved leadership style can have a significant effect on your performance. Even small changes in your behavior can have a huge impact on productivity, executive presence, and engagement.

Share your plan with trusted people who can help you with suggestions, accountability, and encouragement. Consider working with a leadership coach to help you achieve your goals!

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Stafani Yorges, Ph.D. is a psychologist and professional leadership coach. Her unique background as an educator, consultant, and coach helps others connect personal potential to peak performance. She has expertise in a variety of leadership models and assessment tools. Her formal education is in the behavioral sciences, receiving her Ph.D. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from Purdue University in 1996. She has been teaching in the graduate program at West Chester University in Pennsylvania for 20 years.

Stefani is an active leadership consultant who has engaged with over 100 clients from more than 30 companies. She specializes in positive leadership strategies, strengths-based leadership, and transformational leadership models. She is a certified executive coach, accredited by the International Coaching Federation.

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