

*In this guest article, assessment expert Dennis E. Coates, Ph.D., highlights a powerful new use for 360-degree feedback.*

## **THE MOST POWERFUL WAY TO USE 360-DEGREE FEEDBACK (IT MAY NOT BE WHAT YOU THINK)**

- Dennis E. Coates, Ph.D.

It has been a quarter of a century since 360-degree feedback first began to sweep through corporate America. In that time, the technology and how it's perceived has changed greatly—and is still changing.



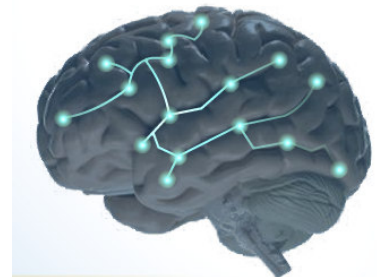
Originally, 360 was a rigid one-size-fits-all executive assessment. It has evolved into a flexible platform for creating customized surveys that provide feedback for all employees and that reflect the uniqueness of a particular organization and.

Happily, these surveys aren't as costly as they were in the old days. Back when executive leadership feedback cost about \$250 per administration, I once asked the Director of Human Resources at Tupperware what he thought the service should cost. His answer: \$25 per person. At the time, I thought his reply was totally unrealistic. But his notion was on target. Because today, while it's still possible to pay \$250 or more for 360-degree leadership feedback, with unlimited usage licenses you can actually bring the cost of the finest leadership assessment money can buy down to \$25 per assessment.

Also, 360-degree feedback is no longer viewed as an appropriate technology for performance appraisal. After many painful "lessons learned," enlightened organizations now use it strictly to get the right people into the right performance improvement programs.

And fortunately, most HR professionals no longer assume that 360-degree feedback, by itself, will lead to behavior change. From our current perspective, we know that feedback alone is incapable of changing behavior. It does a great job of highlighting strengths and potential areas for improvement. What happens after assessment—training, coaching and follow-up feedback—is what produces positive changes in behavior and lasting improvements in performance.

As Mark Twain said, "Habit is habit, and not to be flung out of the window by any man, but coaxed down the stairs a step at a time." Work habits are no exception. This is because after many years of doing things a certain way, a network of brain cells has formed to enable the pattern. To replace an undesirable behavior, this network needs to be rewired, a process that requires consistent repetition of the desired behaviors over time. There is simply no way to short-cut the hard work of performance improvement.



Consequently, the most significant and far-reaching change in 360-degree feedback is the shift from being a tool for diagnosing strengths and weaknesses to being a tool for documenting improvements in performance. Instead of dozens of items that address many areas of performance, performance improvement measurement (follow-up assessment) focuses on what the employee is trying to improve.



For example, after Ellen Garcia reviewed her 360 leadership feedback with her boss, they agreed that her top developmental priority was to improve her decision-making. Neither motivation nor empowerment was at issue. She needed training to improve her skills. So her boss arranged for Ellen to attend a 5-day course in decision-making. Before the program began, her coworkers completed a brief decision-making feedback survey based on the behavioral objectives of the course. This survey contained only nine questions. Her lowest score was for the item, “Gets input from team members when they have relevant, useful information.” She knew that the survey would be repeated several months after the course, and she felt keenly motivated to focus on the weak areas, apply what she learned, and achieve better scores. Nine months after she completed the training, the same decision-making survey was administered again, and the new scores reflected a modest improvement. Six months later, the assessment was repeated yet again, showing a substantial improvement.

This use of customized multi-source feedback to measure how much performance has improved over time is a crucial element of the follow-through needed to create lasting, positive changes in behavior. It focuses the participant’s mind on specific issues before training begins. And when the assessment is repeated months later, it creates a scorecard for accountability. The numbers don’t lie.

Today, some organizations still think of 360-degree feedback strictly as a diagnostic tool. Yes, 360 was created for this purpose; for many years it was used only this way. And it continues to be the most effective way to diagnose leadership strengths and weaknesses. But multi-source feedback may be used in many other ways. Using a flexible platform to customize focused feedback for pre-program and post-program feedback is actually the most powerful use of this technology. If you aren’t using multi-source feedback this way now, and if you want assessment and development programs to lead to lasting changes in behavior, I encourage you to learn more about how to use 360 for focused, follow-up performance improvement measurement.

*Dr. Coates is the CEO of Performance Support Systems, Inc. He is the developer of 20/20 Insight, a customizable multi-source feedback platform used worldwide for performance improvement measurement, traditional 360-degree feedback, and many other applications. He is also the author of many articles on leadership, assessment, training and performance.*