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LEADERSHIP SOLUTIONS

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Who's Staring Back in the Mirror? Thoughts on Self-Awareness and Feedback

I recently read a stunning headline summarizing a study where more than half the participating leaders assessed themselves in the top percentile of leadership skills. At first blush, that's somewhat startling, but upon reflection, it shouldn't be so surprising.

The fact is that most of us continue to work in "feedback poor," not "feedback rich" environments. Timely and accurate feedback remains a scarce commodity in most organizations, despite the fact that we know that the enhanced self-awareness that is the by-product of quality feedback drives better business results.

So what's a leader to do?

- Quality feedback can range from simple to more comprehensive. At the simplest end of the scale, it can consist of nothing more than "Here are the things I think you should start doing, stop doing and continue doing to be more effective."
- Most of us are happy to wait for feedback until it's offered, and have a tendency to sit back and wait. The strongest performers are simply more proactive; when they are not naturally getting feedback, they go seek it out.
- In terms of comprehensive feedback, many organizations have had great success building regularly scheduled 360º feedback into their standard operating procedures. For most people, if they're getting any regular feedback, it comes from a single source,--the current boss. Even if that person is skilled at giving feedback, (and in most organizations, that's not a given,) s/he still has a limited vantage point. 360º feedback can enhance the boss's feedback by adding the perspectives of other raters, people like direct reports, peers, and even customers. Their feedback may be the same or different, based upon their expectations, as well as the circumstances where they interact with the person. The person getting the feedback is able to drive their own self-awareness by comparing their self-assessments with those of each of the other rater groups.
    - The feedback is not absolute truth, it's simply data. While it may not always reflect reality, it is always accurate to the extent that it represents the perceptions held by others.

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- The power of the feedback is often that the person getting it now knows how s/he is perceived by others. It's up to him/her to decide whether they're ok with these perceptions, or whether they want to do something to change them.
- Getting 360º feedback is like a long hard look in the mirror. Our reactions can be anywhere from "Yeah, that's pretty much the person I see in the mirror when I brush my teeth every morning," to "I don't recognize the person being described." For most of us, the reaction is somewhere in the middle; we can predict a lot of what others will say about us, but there are generally some surprises as well.
- A common misperception about 360º is that its purpose is to identify someone's flaws or what they aren't very good at. To the contrary, it is equally about identifying the strengths someone has to leverage, they things that they should continue and do more of.
- We also know from research that self-ratings tend to be the least accurate; we all have blind spots. Quality feedback, and particularly 360º, can minimize the blind spots that can derail careers. The simple truth is that the only way we can become aware of our blind spots (and ideally address them) is when we hear about them from others.

Mirror, mirror on the wall, can that really be me?

The answer is we won't know until we get some feedback, and 360º feedback debriefed with a skilled facilitator can be a very effective tool for finding out. We strongly encourage people to get 360º "early and often," before those blind spots morph into fatal flaws. Some useful tips to remember:

- Before embarking on a 360º initiative, think through what happens after the results are in. There's no payback on the investment unless the 360º is accompanied by development planning resources designed to help strengthen development needs. The value lies in including 360º as an element of a comprehensive development strategy, not as a stand alone effort.
- The follow-on to providing development planning resources is to build in accountability for doing something different as a result. While it's not necessary, nor even advisable, to have someone share their 360º results broadly, it is definitely best practice to share the elements of a

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development plan and invite feedback on ongoing progress. People are not mind readers, and development is not always a steady progression of improvements. We all require ongoing, real-time specific feedback about what's working and what isn't to enable true progress.

- We know that raters often tend to be fairly "gentle" in their ratings when an organization first introduces 360º. Once the first cycle has been completed and people realize no one got penalized for the ratings they gave, ratings often tend to drop in the next cycle as people become comfortable being more candid.
- There are many good 360º instruments available, but my advice would be to select one that allows raters to provide narrative comments to support their ratings. In my experience, the narrative comments often represent the richest part of the feedback and they provide a context for the person getting the feedback to understand it more deeply.
- Most 360º tools have a shelf life of no more than two years, so it's important not to rely on data that's too old.

So back to those leaders with the over-inflated sense of their leadership skills (do the math, --half of the folks can't be in the top percentile!) My fear for them is that their blind spots will one day come back to bite them and they'll never even know what hit them. The honest truth is that organizations are less tolerant of leadership weakness the higher an individual progresses. Suddenly, the super star's "signature strengths" are no longer enough to compensate for the now more visible leadership deficiencies, and another career derails unfortunately. What a shame nobody held up a mirror for the person when there was still time.