

# TOOLS OF THE TRADE



**Carol Wilson** identifies the tools and models frequently used during coaching projects. This month, she looks at 360° feedback

**Three hundred and sixty degree feedback is a process used by many organisations today to provide managers with information about how they are viewed by the different people they come into contact with in the course of their work, for example the managers they report to, the staff who report to them and their colleagues, customers and clients.**

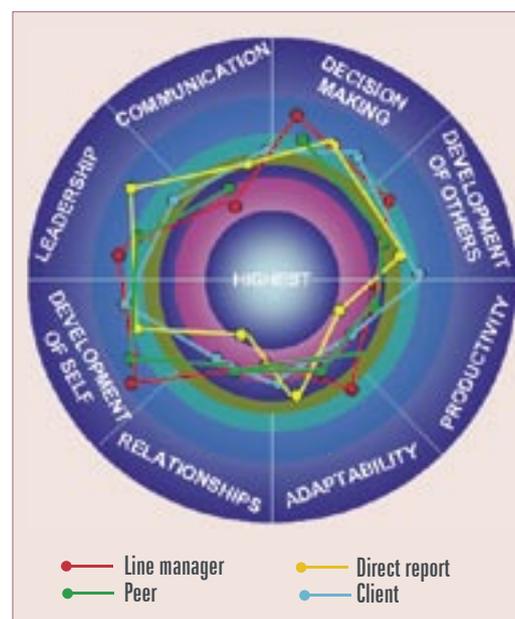
The feedback is usually delivered anonymously. Participants are asked to fill in a series of tick-boxes (often on-line) and to provide individual comments about various aspects of the subject's performance, typically focusing on their skills, abilities, attitudes and behaviours.

Sometimes the subjects can choose the participants and at other times the participants are selected for them.

The subject will receive a detailed report, which quite often includes pie charts and diagrams similar to the one shown below.

The diagram shows that the respondents who took part in the survey were selected from John's peer group, direct reports and clients, plus his manager. The chart seems to show a person who is popular and productive.

360° feedback  
for John Smith



There is perhaps some scope for development on leadership and decision-making. A question that John might ask himself is whether he sacrifices some authority and avoids hard decisions because of a wish to be liked. A coach in this situation might offer this insight as a suggestion if John does not come up with it himself.

The way a coach would handle delivering such a report is to ask insight-creating questions, such as:

- What have you learned from this?
- How important is this aspect to you?
- What impact does this have on your work/life?
- How would you like it to be?
- Where do you shine?
- What aspects you would most like to change?
- What you like this survey to show if it was done again in six months' time?
- How could you achieve that?

If any of the comments have had a negative impact on John, it will help to explore his feelings and reactions thoroughly so that he can see past any initial anger or fear created by the survey.

The process can be helpful in the case of a manager who does not realise he or she is a bully, perhaps, or to identify the areas on which to work during a forthcoming coaching programme. It is particularly useful when a whole tier of management is out of touch with how it is viewed by the rest of the organisation.

It is important that the questions in the survey are designed to take into account employment law issues such as sexism and ageism (which is illegal since legislation was passed in 2006). Respondents should also be made aware of such legislation in terms of their responses.

The pitfalls of this type of survey are that:

- Respondents are not always honest in case their identities are guessed

- Sometimes their identities are guessed or, at worst, wrongly presumed
- Personal grudges, jealousy or ambitions can influence a respondent's comments
- Negative feedback can be meaningless without knowing where it comes from
- People tend to hear criticism louder than praise and can become demoralised by the process
- The process does not adhere to the openness and transparency advocated in coaching.

Any type of survey that asks some members of staff to give feedback about other people in the business must be managed with great care; for example, the recipient should be coached through the results rather than just handed a report. I have personally worked with a manager whose confidence was so shattered by her 360° feedback that she was unable to return to work for a week, in spite of having been an apparently successful and popular manager for many years.

She later discovered that some of the most injurious comments had been intended to refer to a different manager altogether – but, astonishingly, this was not made clear when she was given the results. She says she may never regain her confidence.

Another unwelcome side effect is that some managers hide behind the process of written feedback in this way, now that it is available on a regular basis, rather than confront a colleague, boss or report with their grievances. I worked with a senior manager of a multi-national who intensely resented the fact that some scathing comments from his own line manager had gone the rounds of HR and various directors before he had even seen them. To add to his sense of injustice, his manager had never raised any of the criticisms with him directly; in fact,

the situation was quite the reverse and he had thought himself highly regarded and doing a good job.

Surveys such as these fly directly in the face of the principles of coaching, namely building self-belief, enabling self-directed learning and creating a 'blame-free culture'. Nevertheless, they have taken a firm hold in many of the companies whose stated aim is to create a coaching culture, so coaches need to know how to handle their effects.

In situations such as I have described, the guideline to follow would be to get the individuals involved talking – coach them on how to have a non-confrontational, inoffensive conversation, offer to facilitate a meeting or give them some training in coaching skills and concepts. Find a way to get the conflicts out into the open, off paper and into the discussion arena.

A 360° survey run throughout an organisation will be more acceptable to staff if the directors are on the receiving end as well as the rest of the managers; one advantage of having people appraise their own boss is that they obtain new insight into their own leadership qualities, skills and behaviour.

Sadly, it is probably true that the more an organisation's managers can deal with the results of a 360° in a 'grown up' way, the less likely they are to require the information. So where there are managers who show substantial room for improvement in their leadership, communication and performance skills, the survey is more likely to have a detrimental effect, creating fear, depression and defensiveness. On the other hand, managers who score highly in the areas mentioned are likely to welcome some adverse feedback as a helping hand towards even higher achievements.

What a 360° can reveal is information about the culture of the organisation as much as the

performance of any particular manager. Some organisations operate in a way which limits performance; for example, I once worked in a company where the combined sales and marketing division put most of its energies into proving that the products delivered by the creative/R&D division were unsaleable. This concept was identified in an astute book written by Anthony Jay (creator of political satire *Yes Minister*) in the 1970s, called *Corporation Man*, based on his experiences of working at the BBC.

The culture of an organisation can bring out the best in its people, enabling them to take risks, stretch their imaginations, support future leaders and discover hidden resources within themselves, or it can direct their energies into watching their backs and undermining colleagues regarded as threats or competition. The results of individual 360° surveys when studied as a whole will show up strains that tend to surface throughout the organisation.

An alternative to the 360°'s focus on passing judgments about individuals is Richard Barrett's Cultural Transformation Tools ([www.thevaluescentre.com](http://www.thevaluescentre.com)), which will be the subject of a future article in this series. CTT surveys ask questions about what values an organisation currently exhibits and what the participants would like to see instead. The results provide useful yardsticks against which leaders can measure their performance without pointing the finger at any one individual. ■

**Carol Wilson** is managing director of Performance Coach Training, a joint venture with coaching pioneer Sir John Whitmore's Performance Consultants International, and is head of accreditation and honorary vice-president at the Association for Coaching. She can be contacted on +44 (0)1932 702657, at [carolwilson@performancecoachtraining.com](mailto:carolwilson@performancecoachtraining.com) or via [www.performancecoachtraining.com](http://www.performancecoachtraining.com)