

# Part One: The Leadership 360 Process

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## By Natalie Michael, CHRP

As an HR professional, you are likely tasked with facilitating a 360 process for your leadership team in the New Year. This is a project that needs to be managed with finesse because when achievement-oriented leaders receive feedback about their performance, they often take even the slightest negative comment hard. When they feel down about their results, they may blame HR instead of taking personal accountability for refining their style. To help you successfully manage the 360 process and maintain your credibility, here are some important tips.

### Key Assumptions that Guide the 360 process

A 360 process is fundamentally designed to give leaders direct feedback about the impact they are having on others. There are some core assumptions about leadership that are built into this process. These are:

1. People perform and are more engaged at work when they have positive relationships.
2. When people are lucky enough to have a mutually productive and positive work relationship, this is a huge asset and it should be celebrated and maintained. A 360 process can reveal these wins!
3. If through the 360 process, leaders find that other people do not perceive them in a positive way this is an opportunity to make a change. If a leader decides to take action based on the results, they are showing respect for the feedback raters and demonstrating that they value other people's perspective, even when it does not match their own.
4. To work effectively with others, leaders don't have to change their inherent personality, but they do not need to develop behavioural versatility. Ideally they build self-awareness from the 360 process and they develop a variety of skills for handling interpersonal relationships, and they become more skilled at interacting with people who have styles that are different from them.

### The Feedback Mindset

There are a few points in the core assumptions above which are important to emphasize. Namely, that 360 feedback is all about relationships and versatility. 360 feedback results answer the question: "What impact is a leader having on *this group of people*?" This is different from "Am I a good leader?" A participant may be a fantastic leader in other situations and with different types of teams, but their 360 results won't show that. 360 results simply tell leaders whether or not their style is effective and productive with these individuals.

Although this may sound trite, it is a major point. Many leaders get very disappointed when they have had positive 360 results in the past and they get some negative feedback. They often say, "I just don't get it. All of my past 360 results have been stellar. What has gone wrong? Am I losing my edge?" In reality, everyone can be successful somewhere and every style has its strengths and weaknesses. 360 results just tell a leader whether or not their style is effective *right now* with the group of feedback raters.

### Why Is There Sometimes a Mismatch Between Self-Perception and Feedback?

If a leader sees the results and they don't match their self-perception, a logical question is "why?" David Merrill and Roger Reid in *Personal Styles and Effective Performance* explain it well. In their book, they explain that leaders develop behavioural habits. In the most basic sense, people tend to do things that make them comfortable and they avoid things that make them uncomfortable, or cause them tension. Once people discover that a certain pattern of action makes them comfortable and it gets a certain result, they tend to repeat it, especially if it is positively reinforced.

These behavioural habits begin early in life. For example, parents who want their children to be assertive often seek out teachers, friends, and coaches that reinforce this type of behaviour. Soon this accepted type of behaviour becomes so ingrained that a person may not even realize it is a habit. This happens to all of us. We repeat the behaviours that make us comfortable and successful in the past. Later in life we choose activities and occupations that are an extension of this basic style and avoid situations that disapprove of it, or suggest that another mode of behaviour is more

effective. We also tend to label people who act differently from us as “bad” and people are similar to us as “good.”

We can keep going along this way our whole life, but for leaders they usually come up against situations which reveal the limitations of their habits and unilateral style. For example, Allison is the CEO of a retail chain. She initially did not want to do a 360 because she knew that she was not having a positive impact on others. There was 100 per cent turnover on her executive team. She tried to justify avoiding the 360 by saying: “I don’t care what these people think. They are all too junior and they don’t understand why I behave the way I do.” I thought to myself, “Umm...they are all you got. Everyone else has left.”

Her 360 results revealed that her view of her behaviour – strategic, assertive, results-oriented – was being perceived as pushy, rude, disrespectful and exhausting. Ouch. The good news is that Allison soaked up the feedback and really considered why this disconnect was happening. She realized that although her style was comfortable to her and maybe to senior executives, it was not comfortable for her current team – the people she was relying on to run the company. She had to figure out how to shift her behaviour so she had just enough pressure to motivate her junior team, but not so much that she was killing morale. It was not that her style was inherently bad or good, it was just that it was not productive in this circumstance.

**Watch for *Part Two: Tips to Get the Most From the 360 Process* in [HRVoice.org](http://HRVoice.org).**

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