

MIRRORS ALL AROUND

By Dennis Heath



A 360-degree assessment can be an eye opening revelation of how others really see you

360° assessments are becoming more popular in Singapore as a way of measuring a manager's effectiveness in the workplace. But what exactly is a 360°, what purpose do they serve and how do you know if the results are valid?

Fundamentally a 360° assessment is a collection of opinions on an individual's performance from his or her boss, peers and subordinates, as well as their own opinion. Different types of 360° assessment may measure different things but they are usually aimed at facets of management or leadership. They might include such dimensions as team working, empathy, results orientation, negotiation style, influence and control and interpersonal skills.

In earlier days a 360° might be implemented by a consultant personally interviewing observers, or they might even be invited to a group feedback session. Nowadays electronic or Web based questionnaires are much more prevalent.

Being the subject of a 360° can be quite an intimidating experience, particularly in the context of Asian culture where it is not usual for people to provide direct feedback to others, especially their boss. However, it can be enormously powerful as a developmental tool. I always describe it to my clients as a "behavioural mirror". When you look in a normal mirror you see your physical self. A 360° is like a behavioural mirror. It shows you who you really are, as viewed by your colleagues, regardless of who you think you are. If properly positioned and professionally handled a 360° can be extremely valuable to the participant, provided they accept the results and acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses it discovers.

The process normally starts with the subject of the 360° choosing at least three or more peers and three or more subordinates, plus their boss as observers. There might even be more than one boss in today's matrix management style of organisation. The observers complete a questionnaire designed to test their opinions on the manager's performance. Answers can be given by choosing from multiple choices, or by selecting a score from 1-10, or by marking a scale from "most like" at one end to "least like" at the other. The construction of the questionnaire depends on the instrument being used. Results are then aggregated and presented in the form of a score for each facet being measured.

Scores derived from peers and subordinates are aggregated to preserve the anonymity of the observers. Such anonymity is essential if observers are to be honest in their feedback. When the final report is produced no-one should be able to tell who said what, although the boss's scores are normally shown separately. In earlier days a 360° might be implemented by a consultant personally interviewing observers, or they might even be invited to a group feedback session. Nowadays electronic or Web based questionnaires are much more prevalent.

Similarly the results of the questionnaire are normally computer generated and may be presented in graphical form showing aggregated scores on each dimension on a scale, or in narrative form, or a mixture of both. Of utmost importance is the way that the results are fed back to the participant. A 360° is a dangerous weapon in the hands of an untrained user. A careful balance needs to be struck in the way that any apparent

weaknesses are balanced by equally important strengths. It is vital that the person giving the feedback not only understands the feedback process but is also fully conversant with the particular instrument being used. If the feedback is given skillfully and sensitively the participant will gratefully accept the findings and view the whole experience as a positive step in his or her professional development.

If done well and with good instruments, 360° are an extremely valuable tool in identifying developmental needs in order to produce higher performing managers and executives.

When employing an external consultant to conduct 360°, questions that should be asked are:

- a) How well proven is the chosen 360° instrument? Is it reliable and valid?
- b) Is the consultant fully trained and licensed in the use of the instrument?
- c) Is it administered in a way that fits the need, i.e. paper based or Web based?
- d) Is the questionnaire constructed in a way that eliminates "halo" effect, i.e. by looking at the questions is it possible for an observer to deliberately mark-up a score if they like the person being measured, or vice versa if they don't like him or her?
- e) Does the instrument measure what needs to be measured?

These are the fundamental questions that need to be answered before launching into a 360° exercise. If done well and with good instruments, 360°s are an extremely valuable tool in identifying developmental needs in order to produce higher performing managers and executives.