

The Impact of Coaching vs. Feedback

There is a disturbing trend in leadership development. In an effort to save money and/or time, many companies are providing their executives feedback without also providing a coach.

Giving someone feedback, even data from a valid and reliable multi-rater 360 survey without coaching support has been shown to have no significant impact on their leadership development or behavioral change (Shipper, 2009).

In addition, while many companies are beginning to include “developing others” as a key leadership competence, managers and executives are rarely taught how to properly assess or have developmental dialogs their direct reports.

While just giving feedback allows HR professional and supervisors to check off the box that they did attempt to develop others, this “activity” has little or no impact on performance and is essentially a waste of time and money.

Yet, good feedback is an essential part of coaching. Therefore, it is important to understand the role feedback can and cannot play in someone’s development.

Feedback.

Feedback is a great way to increase someone’s self-awareness. For example, research has shown that 360 feedback increases awareness of one’s strengths and weaknesses (Shipper and Dillard, 2000).

However, as Shipper and Dillard go on to state, “to expect meaningful changes to occur simply from the process of feedback without providing additional assistance and a supportive environment is probably naive at best.” Their study supported the earlier work of several researchers including Smither, London & Reilly (2005) who found that feedback alone resulted in no significant increases in leadership effectiveness.

Ideally, feedback is just data. If presented properly, feedback is not positive or negative. It is just data to make someone aware of the impact of his/her skills and behaviors on others. As most people know, good feedback is not evaluative but is descriptive, specific and timely. However, especially in a work context where there are power differences and politics, even feedback that was not intended to be evaluative can be experienced as being negative. In fact, when people hear the phrase “Do you mind if I give you some feedback?” they assume they are about to hear something negative.

When managers perceive they have received negative feedback from a 360 survey, research has shown that:

1. Recipients can become angry and discouraged to the point that it curbs any performance improvement (Brett, J. F., & Atwater, L. E. 2001).
2. Managers who feel their subordinates have given them negative feedback sometimes exhibit less commitment and support for their subordinates (Atwater, L. E., Waldman, D. A., Atwater, D., & Cartier, P., 2000).

In short, at best, feedback alone has no significant impact on performance. However, in some instances feedback alone can have a negative impact on an executive's performance as a leader.

Coaching.

However, when done correctly, feedback is an essential part of effective coaching. It is the coaching, not the data alone, that creates the environment for change and development.

While a skilled coach can be an objective interpreter of the 360 data as well as being a source of alternative interpretations of the feedback, a coach can go well beyond the data to:

- ? Provide a strategic and business context for prioritizing what behaviors to stop, start and continue
- ? Help explore the root causes of dysfunctional behaviors
- ? Raise issues the coachee is avoiding
- ? Provide an objective sounding board
- ? Facilitate the creation of a development plan
- ? Facilitate discussions with one's boss, peers, etc.
- ? Be an advocate for the coachee's development
- ? Expose and explore blind spots
- ? Simultaneously set high goals and provide needed support to attain these goals
- ? Observe the coachee in vivo to provide real-time feedback
- ? Increase the ability of feedback recipients to set goals necessary for behavioral change (Locke and Latham, 1990)
- ? Increase recipient's feelings of accountability to use the feedback to change his/her behavior (London, Smither & Adsit, 1997)
- ? Manage the stages of change needed to go through to reach developmental goals (Dalton and Hollenbeck, 2001)

When coaching is added to simple data interpretation, it has been shown to "increase leadership effectiveness up to 60 per cent -- according to direct report and peer post-survey feedback (Thach, 2002)." In fact, Thach's study also showed that the more coaching sessions one receives, the more effective they got. This is not surprising since changing one's behavior cannot be done in a short period of time.

That is, coaching provides the support most people need to abandon old habits and risk trying new behaviors. It has been well documented that changing in-grained behavior cannot be accomplished in one instance of getting 360 feedback (Shipper, 2009). It takes an intensive process over a period of time to change behavior (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002).

Not surprisingly, Shipper (2009) found that 100% of the people who complete learning contracts showed significant improvement over people who only received feedback. That is, just helping executives make a commitment and holding them accountable for change has a significant impact on their performance.

Coaching has also been shown to impact business results. In a recently study looking at the business impact of coaching, Levenson (2009) found that “coordinating executive coaching with other leadership development, performance improvement, and rewards initiatives should increase business impact.” That is, coaching can improve individual as well as firm performance when it is part of a comprehensive development process.

Finally, coaching has even been shown to significantly impact the effectiveness of management development programs (Olivero, Bane and Kopelman, 1997).

In short, while feedback alone cannot change performance, coaching can.

The chart below summarizes some of the major differences between feedback and coaching.

Feedback and Coaching: The Differences	
Feedback	Coaching
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can increase self-awareness• Focused on past behavior• Reactive to a situation• Usually one-way communication to receiver• Telling or advice oriented• Goal is to get receiver to act a certain way• Focused on data and information• Telling• Controlled by giver• Describes consequences• Requires minimal training and skill• Something managers must do• Does not impact performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increases likelihood of change• Focused on future behavior• Proactive to obtain a developmental goal• Only effective as two-way dialog• Inquiry oriented• Goal is to get recipient to explore options• Focused on unlocking potential• Engaging• Controlled by receiver• Explores alternatives• Requires training and specialized skills• Something direct reports must want• Can impact performance

Recommendations.

1. If your leadership development budget has been cut or is not adequate to provide coaching to 100 executives, rather than providing just 360 feedback to all 100, use the money to coach 5 or 6 of them. At least you would have a chance at making a difference in the performance of 5 or 6 people.
2. If you use a 360 survey, use one that leads to and sets up coaching. As Paul Connolly, author of the Clark Wilson Group 360 assessments states (personal communication), good feedback tools should be:
 - ? Related to the recipient's role.
 - ? Based on skills and behaviors others can see.
 - ? Based on skills and behaviors the recipient can change.
 - ? Given in a format that prioritizes the data so the recipient is not overwhelmed.
3. Use external coaches who can go well beyond the data in a 360 survey.
4. Make coaching a part of a larger, integrated development process.
5. If your executives are expected to coach their direct reports, get them trained, especially in the skills needed to provide both performance feedback and developmental coaching (which are different!).

Good coaching makes great business sense. Feedback alone does not. Executives need to understand the difference.