

360 Feedback Tools: How to Get the Most Value

By **Nicki Roth, Co-founder, Saroga: The Nonprofit Leadership Forum**

Feeling skeptical about initiating a 360 feedback process for yourself or other leaders? You are not alone. 360s can be powerful, yet too often they are just headaches or time-wasters. Ostensibly, a 360 process should gather feedback from bosses, peers, and direct reports to gain insight into a leader's strengths and areas for improvement; the intent is growth, not performance assessment. Sadly, too often things go awry because the terms of engagement and expected course of action are ill-defined at the onset. Confusion and misuse diminish the potent impact 360 tools can have on leaders and organizations.

Consider these two examples.

After five years as executive director the board was uncertain about how effective Sylvia was in her role. Board members had questions about how well she managed her team and whether she was keeping the staff focused on the right activities. A few concerns from staff had bubbled up to the board, and it agreed some kind of reality check was needed. When the board chairman contacted Sylvia, he said, "It's been five years and we haven't conducted a formal feedback process, and we thought it would be a good idea. We continue to support your leadership but want to offer a development opportunity for you to grow. Would you be comfortable participating in a 360 feedback process?" Sylvia felt compelled to say yes and then asked some follow up questions. "Is this a formal review? Who is going to see the results? How will this be communicated to the staff? Are you asking other leaders to go through this process? How will the results be used?" The chairman framed his responses in the most positive and supportive light, but Sylvia remained concerned.

Now consider Miguel, an executive director for three years. In his monthly meeting with the board chairwoman he remarked, “I feel like I’ve made some great progress since I arrived but I’m not sure I’m doing all I can. I am looking for a development opportunity where I can build on my strengths but also challenge myself to learn some new skills. I’ve been talking with some folks and doing some research. I found a 360 tool that I think fits my circumstances. Would you support this type of process?” The chairwoman asked a series of questions to learn more about Miguel’s aspirations and to explore additional resources he may need. In the end she was fully supportive of Miguel’s plans.

Sylvia’s situation is far more common than Miguel’s. She received mixed messages about her performance as well as the rationale for conducting a 360 process. “Development opportunity” in her case actually meant comprehensive performance review. The board was seeking feedback from multiple sources to make an assessment about Sylvia’s leadership based on the assumption that follow-up corrective actions would be necessary. Muddying the waters at the onset undercut the purpose and value of a robust 360 process.

Be Clear on the “Why” of Conducting a 360

If you decide to begin a 360 process—whether for yourself or for someone else—be very clear about what you want at the beginning. As a board do you want to invest in the growth and continued success of the leader? As a leader do you want to keep learning and expanding your effectiveness in the organization and achieving the mission? If so, then a 360 is a useful resource.

Conversely if, as a board or the boss of other leaders, you have performance concerns or have already determined that this leader may not ever be successful in this environment, don’t use a 360. Other HR performance management tools like annual reviews or upward feedback sessions are more appropriate. Making these sharp distinctions in your organizational practices helps the staff to see a 360 as a reward and benefit for high performance.

Get the Most from the Process

Assuming that your intentions are clear, consider this framework to derive the greatest value from a 360 feedback process.

- **Ultimately, 360s help the recipients most, so they must see themselves as driving the process.** Without an internal desire to learn and grow, this exercise can’t work. It will yield an interesting feedback report, but there will be no impetus to create sustainable individual change. There must be intrinsic motivation for personal growth. Even if the idea first comes from the board, the leader must be highly motivated to take in feedback and enter a learning process.

- **Gathering feedback from key constituents is only the first step. Using the data to plan and make personal change is the real star of the show.** While the “event” of the 360 process is usually completed within four to six weeks, the longer term growth plan is the heart of the work. Without building a robust, deliberate, and actionable development map based on the feedback results, the impact will likely be minimal.
- **Committing resources for ongoing growth is the critical success factor.** Follow-up coaching, mentoring, courses, and stretch assignments with good supervision are the most common leadership development tools with good reason: they work. Most of them cost money, take time, and require a serious investment from the leader and the board. This is where the true value of the 360 gets unleashed.
- **One size 360 does not fit all.** There is a wide range of 360 tools available and finding the one that works for your organization matters. Some focus on an array of management competencies while others target leadership behaviors. Some are very long (50 questions or more), some are strengths based, others rely on verbatim comments, and others read more like a performance review. Clarify exactly what you want to learn more about. Do you—or does your board—suspect that beefing up basic management skills is needed? Are you or your board most interested in you having a greater impact in your leadership role? Review a handful of tools and select the one that best fits your development needs as well as the organizational culture.

360s Provide a Powerful Experience— If Approached Correctly

When 360s first appeared on the scene a couple decades ago, everyone viewed them as “silver bullets,” meaning they could pack a punch, so use them judiciously. Only a select group of leaders were put through the process, high-priced consultants were brought in to deliver and interpret the reports, and the data could lead to significant consequences in leaders’ careers (both good and bad).

Today, 360s are used more broadly, they don’t cost as much, and the output doesn’t carry the same weight. What has prevailed over time is the notion that a 360 can be a very powerful experience, though a history of poor implementation dramatically dilutes many leaders’ expectations for high impact.

Follow these three best practices to increase the odds of a powerful experience and meaningful growth for nonprofit leaders.

1. Position 360s as a perk, an investment in key people’s future, and a significant growth opportunity. If your organization wants to invest in talent, use 360s for senior leaders and more skills-based tools for manager development. People should understand that being invited to engage in a 360 signals “we are committed to you.” Reserve 360s for leaders who are or will be running a function or the organization.

2. Select a tool that is brief (20 to 35 questions), behaviorally anchored, and aligns with a nonprofit leader's experience. There is a point of diminishing returns with these tools where more questions don't actually yield richer information. Make sure the questions relate to observable actions—"Routinely monitors progress on objectives with the team"—rather than internal ideation—"Is a strategic thinker." Most 360s come from the for-profit sphere with long lists of competencies that are not always relevant for nonprofits, so make certain the survey matches the requirements of your leadership role and context.

3. Engage a coach for the development process. The feedback provides insights that will focus the participant's attention. From there she or he needs to identify the growth path forward. Ongoing conversations with a professional coach is the most potent way to practice and implement new behaviors to enhance leadership effectiveness. The 360 is the catalyst and database for the self discovery and the coach is the facilitator and guide for continued growth.

Positioned and used properly, 360s accelerate growth in leaders. This, in turn, generates a multiplier effect on the organization's goals, mission, and impact. I still believe that a good 360 process can be a "silver bullet." It is one valuable shot at change that matters.



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