



Issue 218 - May 2021

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A few years ago, our family visited a corn maze. It was a series of pathways cut through a large cornfield. The corn was 7 -- 8 feet high. Once in the maze, there was no way to see over the corn. It was a long and complex maze with many dead-ends and circular loops.

Before we entered the maze, we looked at a large map showing every pathway and dead-end and the circling route that would bring us back out. Our son, Chris, and I felt pretty smug as we pulled out our phones and took a photo of the maze map. We were clearly going to get through the cornfield in record time.

Once we were deep into the maze and hopelessly confused, we pulled out our map photos to figure out what route to take. It was totally useless. There wasn't a blinking blue dot showing "you are here." We had no idea where we were in the maze. It's very tough to get from here to there when you don't know where 'here' is. So, we put our maps away and stumbled blindly through the maze with the rest of our family.

**How to Avoid Spinning into the 360 Degree Feedback Death Spiral**

**Many Leaders are Allergic to Feedback and Blissfully Ignorant**

**How to Turbo Charge Your Leadership with Informal Feedback**

**Read *The Leader Letter* in Weekly Installments**

**Feedback and Follow-Up**



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This issue focuses on feedback. Feedback is the blinking blue dot that shows "you are here." Like a cluster of GPS satellites triangulating our location, effective 360-degree feedback pulls together data from direct reports, managers, peers, and others to pinpoint a leader's effectiveness. BUT, not all behaviors have the same impact. Measuring irrelevant behaviors is one of the 12 components adding more spin to the 360-degree feedback death spiral. You'll find keys to navigate through the maze of the many thousands of 360 tools and approaches now available.

An ancient philosopher said, "we can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when (leaders) are afraid of the light." We'll look at how many leaders are allergic to feedback and blissfully ignorant. Their reactions are to be "prisoners of score" or "me-deep in fooling themselves." As Zenger Folkman's 360 assessments show, when leaders seek out and act on feedback, they're up to four times more effective than their peers. But good leaders can also fall short of extraordinary leadership because they don't know and leverage their strengths.

Ignorance may be bliss, but it's deadly to leadership effectiveness. What if you're "that boss?" What if you think your blinking blue dot is in a completely different place than everyone feels it is? Their perceptions form your leadership reality. You could be badly lost in the maze and not even know it. If you don't know where you are, you may not be there. Informal feedback isn't as precise at pinpointing your location as an effective a 360-degree assessment. But it can show roughly where you are. We'll look at how you can do an informal 360 and other ways of getting feedback.

Where's your blinking blue dot? How do you **know**?

## How to Avoid Spinning into the 360 Degree

WEBINAR



May 26 - 2PM

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# Feedback Death Spiral



The use of 360-degree assessments has exploded in the past few decades. They're now widely available in a bewildering variety of tools used for leadership development, executive coaching, performance management, personal growth, etc. Do a Google search on variations of 360-degree feedback, assessment, or tools and go shopping among millions of options. The specific phrase "360-degree feedback software" alone yields over 30,000 choices. More than one hundred 360 apps, including 29 free ones, are available. Amazon lists over 160 books on 360 feedback.

We've talked with some executives who have seen so much pain and suffering from 360s they've banned their use. A retired HR executive reflected on her role in the 360 carnage, "I brought 360-degree feedback systems into our company in a big way. It makes me queasy to write those words because 360-degree feedback is as evil and anti-human a mindset and methodology as you could find anywhere in the weenified, bureaucratic workplace."

Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman have decades of experience researching, designing, training, and coaching on 360-degree assessments. They've published dozens of books, research papers, articles in *Harvard Business Review*, *Forbes*, and numerous HR, training, and talent development publications on 360s. Zenger Folkman has facilitated over 1.5 million 360 assessments of over 100,000 leaders.

Recently, they condensed all this research and experience into a webinar on **How to Make 360 Feedback Reviews Successful**. The webinar:

1. Identifies critical factors for a successful 360-degree feedback

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experience

2. Presents data correlating business outcomes and leadership effectiveness
3. Shows how a successful 360-degree feedback experience improves a leader's effectiveness
4. Identifies major hurdles blocking improvement
5. Provides a chance for participants to assess their current competence in asking for and acting on feedback

Jack and Joe also prepared a new white paper on **The 12 Components of the Best 360-Degree Assessments**. Here's a very brief summary (click the link for a deeper description):

1. **Selects differentiating competencies empirically**  
Differentiating competencies clearly define the behaviors of high and low performers
2. **Makes each question count**  
Brief assessments with focused, researched, and weighted questions
3. **Avoids "false-positives"**  
Standard "agree-disagree" rating scales often give inaccurate results
4. **Is easily understood by an intelligent layman**  
Language, charts, and graphs should be simple and easy to interpret
5. **Measures the leader's impact on employee engagement**  
Leaders need to see the direct impact of their behavior on engagement
6. **Identifies the most important competencies for each leader**  
The most critical and least relevant competencies differ widely for various roles and positions
7. **Focuses written comments on correcting significant flaws, not minor improvements**  
Improvement suggestions on weaker areas that aren't critical problems often detract from leveraging strengths
8. **Compares scores to a high, meaningful standard**  
Relating assessment results to 75th and 90th global norms encourages higher development goals
9. **Leads to a personally relevant, strengths-based development plan for the leader**  
A few profound strengths, not the absences of weaknesses, make leaders highly effective
10. **Ensures data security**  
Confidentiality and data security supports greater honesty and assurance
11. **Builds participant confidence regarding the use of personal data**  
Assessments focused on development yield better results than using

360s for evaluation and measurement

## 12. Leverages data collected to gain important organizational insights

Aggregated assessment data can help with personal, team, and organization development

We hear a range of stories about 360s in our **executive coaching** practice. As with any tool, for example a sharp knife, 360s can cut both ways. When badly designed and poorly used, 360s inflict deep wounds and even kill personal, team, and culture development.

## Many Leaders Are Allergic to Feedback and Blissfully Ignorant



In our **Executive Coaching** and *Extraordinary Leader* workshops, we see a wide variety of responses to leaders receiving their **360** assessment feedback. We generally see one of these four responses:

### **Prisoners of Score**

These participants are most often in workshops where the leader was forced to participate. They want to serve the minimum time in the session and put little to no weight on their bad ratings. And prisoners always get bad ratings. Their allergic response to feedback is defensiveness that ranges from apathy or -- at the other extreme -- hostility toward the ratings and the 360 process. Some tune out while others respond with versions of "this is just perception; it's not reality."

### **Me-Deep in Fooling Themselves**

Often these participants haven't had 360 feedback before and discourage contrary views on their leadership effectiveness.

Their self-ratings usually show higher scores than everyone else. Often their feedback points to **fatal flaws** that are seriously undermining their leadership effectiveness. This realization creates the most painful visits from SARAA when the perception of their raters creates the reality of their leadership effectiveness.

### **Feeding on Feedback**

These are leaders on the grow. He or she knows that others' perception of their behaviors defines the reality of their leadership impact. They understand the only way to change that perception is to change their own behavior. These leaders have high **coachability** and will build strong personal development plans leveraging their feedback and strengths.

### **Don't Know Their Own Strength**

These leaders are often rated at the 75th percentile or above. If they haven't had a 360 assessment before, he or she may be pleasantly surprised by how positively others see their leadership effectiveness. Often a few towering strengths create a **halo effect** that elevates overall perceptions of this leader's effectiveness. Those positive perceptions correlate to higher levels of engagement, teamwork, safety, quality, service, etc. The danger is underplaying their strengths. Leveraging his or her strengths will elevate their leadership even higher.

### **A SARAA Smack Down**

Most participants get a visit from **SARAA** in some part of their 360 assessment report -- even if their overall rating is quite high. We use this acronym to discuss typical emotional responses to feedback: **S**hock, **A**nger, **R**esentment, and... hopefully -- **A**cceptance and **A**ction. The first three steps are especially true if feedback shows there may be a "fatal flaw" in the leader's effectiveness. Zenger Folkman has found leaders getting the most benefit from their 360 feedback assessments pass through **three stages**; Acceptance --> Prioritization --> Making Change Happen.

Zenger Folkman's 360 **research** shows that leaders rated lowest in looking for opportunities to get feedback are in the bottom 20% of leaders. Leaders rated the highest in looking for opportunities to get feedback are in the top 20% of leaders. What's your approach to feedback?

## **How to Turbo Charge Your Leadership with**

# Informal Feedback



One of our most recent popular blogs was on **bully bosses** and featured a **quiz** to help determine if your boss is a bully or just a poor leader. A follow-up blog on **leading up** included five ways to deal with a bad boss.

But what if you're a bully or poor boss -- and don't know it? You likely don't mean to be "that boss." Perhaps you're a sincere hypocrite? An insincere hypocrite tries to deceive others. A sincere hypocrite deceives him or herself. So how do you know what kind of boss others think you are?

360 assessments can provide that blinking blue dot that pinpoints "you are here" according to your boss, direct reports, peers, and others. The usefulness of 360 assessments depends on the design of the tool and approach as well as how the leader responds to his or her feedback.

There are many **ways** you can get feedback on your personal, team, or organizational effectiveness without formal surveys. These include external coaches, reverse performance appraisals, facilitated focus groups, meeting reflections, project reviews, external assessments, informal networking, and so on.

In their *Harvard Business Review* article, **Making Yourself Indispensable**, Zenger Folkman offers this sidebar:

## ***An Informal 360***

*Before you can build on your strengths, you need an objective view of what they are. Ideally, this comes from a formal, confidential 360-degree evaluation. But if that's not possible, a direct approach can work.*

*Try simply asking your team members, colleagues, and boss these simple questions, either in person or in writing.*

- *What leadership skills do you think are strengths for me?*
- *Is there anything I do that might be considered a fatal flaw -- that could derail my career or lead me to fail in my current job if it's not addressed?*
- *What leadership ability, if outstanding, would have the most significant impact on the productivity or effectiveness of the organization?*
- *What leadership abilities of mine have the most significant impact on you?*

*Do your best to exhibit receptiveness and to create a feeling of safety (especially for direct reports). Make it clear that you're seeking self-improvement. Tell your colleagues explicitly that you are open to negative feedback and that you will absorb it professionally and appropriately -- and without retribution. Of course, you need to follow through on this promise, or the entire process will fail.*

Feedback is the most useful and trustworthy when it's unfiltered and anonymous. An online tool like Survey Monkey can help. You could modify versions of the informal 360 or simply ask three questions about your leadership. "To be an even more effective leader, what should I: 1. Keep doing? 2. Stop doing? 3. Start doing or do more?"

Feedback, like fire, can burn and destroy or warm and energize. Effective feedback received openly with a sincere desire to improve is a powerful combustion chamber turbo-charging leadership effectiveness.

## **Bridging the Distance: Reading, Leading, and Succeeding**





Leaders bring hope, optimism, and positive action. That's really tough to do while social distancing and facing an uncertain future. We multiply misery if we allow the pessimism plague to infect us as well.

To counter Headline Stress Disorder and strengthen resilience, I actively scan a list of resources for research, articles, and tips on leading ourselves and others through these turbulent times. I post those articles every day.

## Bridging the Distance: Reading and Succeeding

Let's shorten our social media distancing. Follow or connect with me:

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Together we can Learn, Laugh, Love, and Lead -- just for the L of it!

## Read *The Leader Letter* in Weekly Installments



The items in each month's issue of *The Leader Letter* are first published in my weekly **blog** during the previous month.

If you read each blog post (or issue of *The Leader Letter*) as it's published over twelve months, you'll have read the equivalent of a leadership book. And you'll pick up a few practical leadership tips that help you use time more strategically and tame your E-Beast!

## Feedback and Follow-Up

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I am always delighted to hear from readers of *The Leader Letter* with feedback, reflections, suggestions, or differing points of view. Nobody is ever identified in *The Leader Letter* without his or her permission. I am also happy to explore customized, in-house adaptations (online these days) of any of my material for your team or organization. Drop me an e-mail at [jim.clemmer@clemmergroup.com](mailto:jim.clemmer@clemmergroup.com) or connect with me on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), or my [blog](#)!

Let's leverage our leadership strengths to work together and get through this challenging time.



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