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A Business Case for 360-Degree

By Elaine S. MacLellan

From January to May 2011, 23 million Americans were glued to their television sets on Wednesday and Thursday nights watching “American Idol.” Despite bad press for the “insensitive” portrayal of underperforming hopefuls at the auditions, and the non-specific feedback from judges (e.g., Randy Jackson’s “Hailey is in it to win it!”), millions watched as the top 13 Idols polished their raw talent, uncovered their uniqueness and unfolded as distinct artists in their own right.

While watching, it dawned on this viewer that “American Idol” is a contemporary, multi-media, multi-million dollar example of multi-source feedback and coaching. On the show, final contestants receive feedback from different categories of people: judges, coaches, musicians, producers, wardrobe specialists, and the American public. Each category provides them with a different perspective and important piece of the “becoming a star in the music business” puzzle. The continuous feedback and improvement process brings the artists to new levels of self-awareness, confidence, skill, and performance.

As a result, “American Idol” has launched the careers of superstars Carrie Underwood (who, according to *Parade* magazine in January 2012, has sold more than 12 million albums

and 18 million digital tracks) and Kelly Clarkson (more than 10 million albums and 16 million tracks). In addition, *Rolling Stone* magazine stated in June 2011 that ‘American Idol’ is the most popular show on TV.” The singing competition makes the case that finding high potentials, and providing them with multi-source feedback, coaches, practice and stretch assignments is good for high potentials and good for business.

With these results, how can we doubt the power of multi-source feedback and coaching? How can we go back to our organizations inspired to create, implement, and embed a best practice 360-degree feedback and executive coaching program that helps high-potential leaders increase their self-awareness, capitalize on strengths, compensate for weaknesses, maximize contributions, and “sing” in their roles?

DEFINITION

What It Is

360-degree feedback and executive coaching is a partnership between a leader/learner, his/her manager and coach (as well as senior management,

Human Resources, and other key stakeholders) focused on achieving strategic organizational goals by increasing the leader’s self-awareness, building capability in key competencies, minimizing ineffective behaviors, and improving performance and contribution to the organization.

There are several types of 360-degree feedback and executive coaching engagements, including:

- **Development** for increased capability, performance, and promotion
- **Performance** improvement of specific competencies and/or the elimination of significant career stallers/stoppers
- **Transition** preparation for a new role
- **Support** and counsel for top executives

The 360-degree feedback and executive coaching process typically includes the following five steps:

1. **Contracting:** Establishing expectations with the learner, coach, and manager.
2. **Assessment and Feedback:** Gathering data from raters and increasing learner awareness regarding important competencies for the role, the learner’s current skill level and potential derailers.

an Idol:

Building Leadership Excellence Through Feedback and Coaching

3. **Goal Setting and Development Planning:** Identifying and documenting strategic, measurable skill development targets and activities.
4. **Skill Building and Coaching:** Promoting progress on development plan measures and activities.
5. **Closing and Next Steps:** Discussing the learner's skill development progress with his/her manager, and determining ways to ensure long-term, self-managed results.

What It Is Not

Contrary to "American Idol," the 360-degree feedback and executive coaching process is not public and should be kept strictly confidential. While human resources professionals often know why learners were selected and managers know why certain competencies were surveyed, learners and their coaches should be the only ones to see the actual 360 report (unless learners decide to share it with their manager).

Additionally, 360-degree feedback and executive coaching programs should not enable managers to avoid dealing with employee performance issues. Although participants can gain additional insight and motivation to change problem behaviors, 360 programs should support performance management practices, not replace them.

BENEFITS

360-degree feedback and executive coaching programs have many benefits for both organizations and their leaders:

Organizations

1. **Leadership development targeted at strategic organizational goals.** During "American Idol," artists are assessed on and developed toward music industry standards of excellence. During 360s, learners are typically assessed on competency models (success profiles) designated as essential for leadership and organizational excellence. This focus enables leaders to target their development on competencies identified as key to achieving strategic organizational goals.

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2. **Increased engagement and retention of top talent:** Through 360-degree feedback and executive coaching, organizations provide learners with one-on-one attention and the opportunity to receive feedback on, plan for, practice, and be held accountable for skill development targeted at their success. As a result, high potentials tend to reach their development and career goals sooner, which increases their engagement level and retention rate, and achieves

organizational talent review and succession planning goals.

3. **Increased "right fit," performance, and value-add for leaders and their staff:** Through 360-degree feedback and coaching, leaders gain insight into their job expectations, strengths, skill gaps, and degree of "fit" in the role and organization. Similar to "American Idol," the process helps answer the question: Is the learner in his/her "sweet spot" giving a best performance and receiving a standing ovation, or is he/she "singing the wrong genre," veering away from true strengths and in danger of being miscast, overlooked, or eliminated? The 360 process helps learners recognize their greatest talents and passions so they can grow in positions where they contribute their best and yield the greatest value. Additionally, once in "right fit" roles, leaders can better maximize the strengths, fit, performance, and contribution of their staff.
4. **Learning culture that promotes continuous improvement, innovation, and growth:** When organizations ask leaders and raters to participate in 360-degree feedback and executive coaching programs, they demonstrate important values like employee development and continuous improvement. Leaders participating in these programs experience proof that their organization invests in people and their growth. They become more committed to a continuous improvement process for themselves and others.

As leaders continuously learn and improve, they are less intimidated by change and are better positioned to lead the organization toward innovation and growth.

Leaders

- 1. Increased self-awareness:** During “American Idol,” a contestant receives feedback that aligns his/her self-perception with those of music experts. This feedback can be painful, but if the singer listens and adjusts, he/she can gain greater awareness, insight, and skill regarding how to deliver a stellar performance. During 360-degree feedback and coaching, a leader receives behavioral data from different perspectives, reflects upon that data with a supportive coach, and gains a better understanding of his/her unique strengths and liabilities. The leader becomes more aware of his/her true self, and often evolves into a more authentic and inspiring leader.
- 2. Greater clarity on key strengths, skill gaps, and career goals:** Through assessment data, coaching discussions, and developmental tools, leaders gain a better understanding of their strengths, contributions, and career aspirations. Grounded in this knowledge, they can advocate for involvement in exciting projects that benefit from their capabilities and let them shine. They can set career goals that play to their

strengths, and manage their careers from an informed place of conscious choice. Additionally, leaders gain awareness of key skill gaps to close and ineffective behaviors to eliminate. In the safety of a coaching relationship, leaders can determine competencies to develop and/or derailers to mitigate based on leadership competency models, job importance rankings, and perceived negative impact. Leaders can also discuss gaps they are unlikely to eliminate, and determine ways to compensate by leveraging their own and others’ strengths.

- 3. Increased ability to learn and develop self and others:** Participating in a 360 development process and building a coaching relationship helps leaders better trust, learn from, and develop themselves and others. Michael Lombardo and Robert Eichinger (founders of Lominger International) identify “learning agility” – the ability and willingness to learn from experience, and then apply that learning to perform successfully under new situations – as the greatest predictor of leadership success. By putting processes in place that help leaders become life-long learners and promote that in others, organizations invest wisely.

BEST PRACTICES

If an organization commits to a 360-degree feedback and executive

coaching program for leaders, what best practices ensure the investment yields the above results?

1. Establish the purpose: Design a 360-degree feedback and executive coaching program with a clear purpose to address specific organizational needs, for example:

- Improving leadership skills to help the organization meet its strategic goals
- Building the talent pipeline to increase leadership readiness for promotion and organizational challenges
- Developing and retaining top leadership talent

On the micro level, the leader, his/her manager and coach should discuss the specific purpose of a coaching engagement during the contracting phase. This way, expectations and trust are more likely to be established upfront and maintained throughout the engagement.

2. Align it with a solid business and talent management framework:

- **Vision, Mission, Values:** Determine and communicate the soul and purpose of the organization. Which societal and customer needs does the organization fulfill? Which values does it honor? What are the employees in the company collectively trying to achieve?
- **Culture:** Does senior leadership participate in and endorse the process? Are raters and leaders ready to give and receive anonymous feedback? If the culture is not one of trust, openness, learning, and continuous improvement (where people are allowed to stretch and make mistakes) the 360 and coaching program will be seriously compromised.
- **Organizational and Individual Goals:** Define, communicate, and cascade the organization’s one-to-three year strategic plan. Provide a process and automated system for entering employee business and development goals, revisiting them throughout the year, and holding people accountable.
- **Essential Leadership Competencies:** Define the leadership skills needed to execute on strategic goals and advance to positions of greater scope and responsibility. If possible, create a multi-level leadership competency

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model that describes skills needed for success at different levels and outlines a career development path for leaders.

3. Create the process: Create a thoughtful process aimed to accomplish the purpose of the 360-degree feedback and coaching program or engagement. Determine the optimal program structure, participants, tools/materials, and communication methods. Provide ample time and support for rater feedback, data analysis, discussion, reflection, practice, and recalibration. Lastly, create an evaluation and continuous improvement process to ensure the program meets or exceeds its goals.

4. Establish roles and ground rules: To help learners and raters feel safe during the process, roles and ground rules need to be well-defined, agreed-upon, and upheld. Participants' managers should be required to provide direction, feedback, and support during the contracting, development planning, and conclusion phases of the engagement. Also, 360 process administrators must ensure the anonymity of raters and the confidentiality of results.

5. Select qualified coaches: Hire trained, certified, and/or experienced coaches who can demonstrate high levels of maturity, integrity, business and organizational savvy, emotional intelligence, systems thinking, and executive presence. Choose coaches who can listen well, ask powerful questions, alter perspectives, and promote insight. Talented coaches can apply a variety of techniques: assessments, assignments, discussion, development planning, shadowing, videotaping, role-playing, and monitoring. Additionally, they keep a systemic perspective, helping learners understand how they fit into the organization and how their actions affect others.

6. Select 360-degree feedback and other assessments: Use research-based, validated 360 assessments where leaders can receive feedback from chain-of-command managers, peers, direct reports, customers, senior management, and other stakeholders. Keep rater categories "pure" (containing only people with the same working relationship to the learner), so that feedback from that perspective is not diluted or obscured.

When appropriate, use stakeholder interviews and additional assessments. Emotional intelligence, interpersonal relationship, and communication and/or conflict style assessments can be particularly useful, as research shows that leaders usually derail due to interpersonal versus functional/technical deficits.

7. Teach leaders to write S.M.A.R.T. development goals and hold them accountable: Good coaching provides leaders with one-on-one tutoring on how to write S.M.A.R.T (Specific, Measureable, Aligned/Agreed-Upon, Realistic, Timed) individual development plans that contain measureable success targets and a mix of the following development activities at roughly the listed percentages:

- On-the-job learning assignments (70%)
- Coaching and mentoring opportunities (20%)
- Books, training, and networking opportunities (10%)

S.M.A.R.T. development plans should be shared with the learner's manager and the final version entered into the organization's performance management system for accountability.

8. Promote long-term learner development: At the conclusion of the engagement, the coach, manager, and learner need to ensure that he/she has the right plan, practice, and support in place to continue development. The manager

should schedule regular skill and career development discussions with the learner, and provide on-the job assignments that promote learner growth long after the engagement is over.

CONCLUSION

As you read this article in spring 2012, the eleventh season of "American Idol" will be in full swing. If you view it, you will witness contestants' self-awareness, confidence, and capability increase through a continuous cycle of feedback, planning, practice, support, and stretch assignments. You will watch as stars are born and the "American Idol" brand soars. Similarly, if you establish a best practice 360-degree feedback and executive coaching program within your organization, you will help key leadership talent "sing" and produce stellar organizational results. ■

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