



Enhancing the Coaching Experience

Research reveals how to successfully integrate 360-feedback data within an executive coaching program

» BY CRAIG DOWDEN, PhD

Executive coaching is used as a leadership development tool with increasing frequency within organizations today. In some cases, coaches use a 360-degree evaluation process to lay the foundation for their coaching work. The goal is that through third-party evaluation, the coach and the coachee can effectively determine the key areas of focus for their work together. Despite the promise of combining these two methodologies, there are best practices that can be employed to maximize the effectiveness of this type of intervention.



An important study provided critical insight into the optimal way to structure such a program. Elizabeth C. Thach, of Sonoma State University in California, evaluated a six-month executive coaching program that included an integrated 360-feedback component. Her results suggested that the leadership effectiveness of the participants increased by an average of 55-60% over the course of the coaching program in 2002.

Participants noted that the process was beneficial for several reasons, including the opportunity to receive feedback from an external coach, enhanced accountability as a consequence of the presence of the coach, as well as support provided by the coach throughout the developmental process.

Given these positive outcomes, the design of the study intervention provides several lessons that can be extracted to better integrate 360-degree feedback into coaching programs in the future:

- 1** The 360-feedback program was designed to be used from a developmental perspective, rather than a promotion or evaluation tool.
- 2** The coach and coachee used the initial coaching session to identify only one to three developmental areas rather than trying to tackle everything outlined in the review. This made the process seem much more manageable and not overwhelming.
- 3** The coach supported the coachee in a variety of ways, including discussing how to thank participants (e.g., their direct reports, peers, etc.) for their involvement

and asking them for their assistance to help the coachee reach his or her developmental goals. This created a community of support for the executive with people who had a vested interest in his or her success. Involving the coachee's team maximized the probability of achieving a positive result, since others in the environment were on the lookout for examples when the executive would meet or would not meet his or her desired goals.

4 Although the 360-feedback report was confidential, the coachee was instructed on how to share the draft development plan with his or her manager. This was important, as it prompted an open conversation about the results and also provided an opportunity for the manager to give his or her input. This maximized alignment between the coachee, the manager and the coach. This also afforded the coach and the coachee the opportunity to identify powerful metrics that could be used to assess the effectiveness of the program.

5 The coaching sessions were spread out over several months, permitting the coach to monitor the progress of the coachee. It also enabled them to identify concrete action steps that could be taken to achieve the developmental objectives. Last but not least, the coach and coachee could adjust the plan as required, depending upon how things were moving forward.

6 The coach also encouraged the coachee to follow-up with his or her manager, peers, and direct reports

to receive informal feedback regarding their progress. Once again, this kept the coaching program top of mind and ensured the coach and coachee understood where things were, or were not, on track. This ongoing consultative process also allowed potential obstacles to be identified in achieving success.

7 Finally, although preliminary, the results suggested that more sessions were associated with larger improvements in overall leadership effectiveness.

This research identifies strategies for structuring an executive coaching program that incorporates a 360-degree element. Examining the list, it makes intuitive sense as to why the program achieved such strong results.

Despite these positive elements, one final observation should be made. Participants in the program were asked to identify any barriers to success. Interestingly, the number one area of challenge was poor chemistry between the coach and coachee. Given the highly personal and individualized nature of this relationship, it makes sense that this element would be incredibly important in influencing its overall success. This highlights how before the start of each coaching assignment, the coach and coachee should meet to discuss their philosophies, style, etc. This level of trust and fit is key to ensuring the success of the program.

When incorporating 360-feedback into the coaching relationship, it can be an invaluable personal and professional development tool for executives. **W**

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