



Episode 52: How to Interpret 360 Feedback

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Today, let's talk about a specific kind of feedback called 360 feedback. 360 feedback is often used in organizations as part of a performance review or as part of a leadership development program. 360s are also common in coaching engagements. They're a key piece of coaching that helps people more clearly understand their strengths and growth opportunities.

A 360 is based on the concept of 360 degrees, which is the number of degrees in a circle. The goal of a 360 process is to get feedback from those in all different directions around you in your circle of relationships. This includes people above you, like your manager, people to the side of you, like your peers, and people below you, like your direct reports.

A 360 can be quantitative, like filling out a survey on line, or it can be qualitative, which is interview based where people are asked open-ended questions to better understand what the perceptions are about a person's style, communication, and leadership.

As you can imagine, a 360 often causes stress. If you're having a 360 completed for you, you're basically asking people – those you get along with and those you don't always get along with – to share honestly what they notice and observe about you.

That's vulnerable. Receiving 360 feedback can derail even the most confident leader – it can send people's brains below the line to a place of anger, hopelessness, or worry. When that happens, negativity takes over and judgment – either for yourself or others – creeps in.

We don't want that. What I do want is for people to think clearly, calmly, and confidently, even when receiving 360 feedback.

Believe it or not, it is possible to have a positive experience when receiving 360 feedback.

What it takes is an intentional mindset, remembering you have choices, and a framework and structure to apply to the feedback.

If we want to stay as positive as possible when receiving 360 feedback, we need a plan. We need a process and framework for still feeling in control, for making sense of the information, and for knowing how to use the information to benefit us.

That's our topic today. I'll share tips and a framework for receiving 360 feedback so that you can stay or come back to feeling centered and empowered so that you can keep thinking effectively.

Let's start with the basics: suppose you just received your 360 feedback. Where and when do you look at it?

Before you read the feedback, make sure you're in a comfortable environment, and have time and space to reflect. Bring self-compassion and give yourself grace, and remember that receiving feedback is

courageous. Engaging in this process means you are being brave. It means you are committed to your growth and development.

After you're in a comfy place and you open up the report, if it's a qualitative 360, you'll likely see a whole bunch of comments from your manager, peers, and direct reports.

The first big idea to remember is that these comments are simply pieces of information. The feedback is not the truth of you. I remind clients of this all the time because, often, my client's first response when looking at a comment is to refute or rebut it.

Please remember this: The feedback is not the truth of you.

What are they are, are perceptions. They are stories that other people's brains create about you based on what they notice, hear, and feel when watching you or interacting with you.

People see our behaviors – what we say, how we say it-- and our energy. Their brain takes in this limited information and draws a conclusion. And because our brains have a negativity bias, the conclusion – or story – is usually a negative one.

Here's a quick personal example. Once, in a virtual coaching session, my client said to me, I can see by your face that you don't like what I'm saying. She was noticing my facial expression and her brain jumped to a negative assumption. I was surprised and I was glad she said something. Because the truth was, I wasn't judging; I was simply thinking deeply about what she said.

When we're talking about a 360, we're talking about perceived behaviors.

What's good about that is that behaviors are things we can put attention to and tweak or shift.

I remind clients that it's helpful to know the perceptions of you that are out there, because then you have a choice as to what you do with them.

Here's what's interesting about that. Sometimes, feedback will be a nudge to adjust behaviors that might be getting in your way. Other times, the feedback is an opportunity to be more explicit.

Often, it's an opportunity to explain your behaviors, to share what's going on in your head, and tell people the conclusions you want them to draw about you.

Whenever clients start to get prickly about a piece of 360 feedback that feels untrue and like they're being seen in a way that doesn't ring true to them, I always say this. People can't read your mind. What might you need to explicitly share?

That brings us to our next big idea: choice.

I invite my clients to choose to see a 360 from an intentional perspective. 360 feedback is not a list of flaws to be fixed. Rather, I encourage my clients to see it as information. They get to choose which of that information they want to pay attention to, based on 3 things:

One, what matters to them personally.

Two, what's expected of them in their role.

And three, what their colleagues and organization need from them.

The next big tip around reading 360 feedback is to remember and to choose a mindset. Our mindset creates our reality, and we get to choose the mindset that feels helpful from which to absorb the information.

One mindset that works well is one of opportunity. Instead of reading feedback from a mindset of “I have to fix myself,” read it with a mindset of “here’s an opportunity to expand my abilities.”

Because feedback is an opportunity to try new ways of thinking and communicating. Many people operate in a narrow range all the time: they think a certain way, and they show up in a certain way.

360 feedback reminds us that we might have more range than we think. We can try new things to expand our presence, communication, and thinking. Leadership is an experiment, and there are always other experiments we can try to see what happens.

In addition to choosing a mindset, you get to choose what you do with each comment and piece of data. Because when you choose intentionally, it’s empowering.

Here’s one framework that can be helpful as you choose what to do with the comments.

I tell clients: when you read the comments, be on the lookout for 3 categories:

First, note the positive comments that you want to absorb and really take in. Too often, we focus only on the negative and we let positive feedback slide right by. Please, please, please take time to take in the positive feedback. You can even print out the praise and put it on your bathroom mirror where you can see it to remember.

Second, look for the comments that are in the bucket I call “helpful low-hanging fruit.” Look for suggestions that are clear and helpful and easy to put into action.

The third category is the trickiest. This group includes comments that are more confusing or harder to put into action. These comments are for pondering. They’re the ones you’ll talk through in your coaching or with your manager. These are your growth opportunities.

Using this framework of the 3 categories can help you remember that you have choice, that you have strengths, and that you’re a learner who can choose to try different behaviors to see what impact they might have.

When you bring a perspective of opportunity, your agency and ability to choose, and your spirit of inquiry, you’ll grow as a professional and as a human being.

And that is something to celebrate.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you would like to talk about having a 360 to better understand your leadership or the leadership of those you work with, please reach out. Email me at deb@debelbaum.com or go to my website debelbaum.com to schedule a consult. I look forward to it. I’m here to help you create your best self at home and at work, so that you’re confident you’re moving in the right direction for you.

Until next time!