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Over 28 years the family of schools grew and currently consists of two accredited early childhood programs: Tobin Children's School and Westwood Children's School; three accredited School-Age Programs: Tobin Afterschool in Needham, Natick, and Westwood; and the Tobin School, a small independent school for children in PreK through grade five. All of the schools are located outside of Boston.

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the 360° evaluation in an educational setting

by Mary Beth Claus Tobin

Teacher evaluations in education have clearly evolved over the last 30 years. Evaluations range from the non-existent; where you assumed everything was fine until you either got fired or your contract was not renewed, all the way to the annual written evaluation which may or may not have had a checklist, a rating scale, or simply a few paragraphs of narrative which was a year in review.

The 360° evaluation isn't the final answer in the ongoing quest to help our teachers and administrators improve, but without question it taps into feedback and new perspectives in a refreshing way that is lacking in more traditional top-down reviews. This tool may be used on its own or as part of a full evaluation program. The Armed Forces in the 1940s were the first to utilize the 360° evaluation tool. It was not until the 1990s that they became a popular tool in human resources departments in the corporate world.

What is the 360° evaluation?

Just what it implies, the 360° evaluation is a process that gathers feedback from each area of your work life. You will be evaluated by your superiors, your colleagues, and your direct reports. If you're a teacher, the list of contributors would include parents, coworkers, director, consultants, and others with whom you interact professionally. If you're a director, the contributors would include your staff, parents, administrative staff, consultants, board members, and other members of your school community. Simply put, feedback from all levels of the organization is collected, organized, and presented to the employee, essentially giving the employee a full 360° view of their performance.

Purpose

Quite simply, the 360° evaluation is used either as a performance appraisal tool or as a developmental tool. You decide. You also make that clear from the start. What are you going to do with the feedback? Are you basing a raise or a promotion on this or are you working with your teachers to help them improve?

Benefits

The beauty of the 360° is that it is effective in any size school and is as easy to administer in a small school community as it is in a larger one. All too frequently in any school community close relationships form and can make it difficult to give honest feedback on performance. When issues are perceived to be sensitive, they are simply avoided and the problem is never resolved satisfactorily. Conversely, in a larger school community, providing feedback to all of your employees can be a daunting task because of the sheer volume of work involved, personal reservations you may have about the process, or lack of direct knowledge about an employee's performance. The 360° format responds to both of these concerns. This type of evaluation process also encourages a diverse view of strengths, barriers, and areas of improvement.

Be aware that during a 360° evaluation you will collect feedback that is repetitive. Repetitive feedback is useful and adds credibility and decreases the likelihood of bias. You will find that going through the process of conducting a 360° evaluation will raise your awareness in a way that will later help pave the way for change. The 360° will provide insight into your performance that only those who

work intimately with you can provide. Information is collected and then organized and framed in a way that the feedback can be heard. If 360° feedback is delivered from an outside source, you increase objectivity and reduce the likelihood of defensive reactions.

The process

This process will change you, your staff, and school and it will help you all grow. Begin with yourself and then go on to others. After you have mentally prepared yourself to jump in and get started you will need to find a trusted person to facilitate your 360°. That could be an easy task or it might be a barrier. You need to approach someone you trust — ideally a board member, executive director, consultant, or work coach. This facilitator must have skill in:

- listening
- organization
- verbal and written communication
- staying focused and on course

And this individual must be trustworthy, and understanding, and have an unwavering commitment to confidentiality. This person must be without a personal agenda.

The process from here is straightforward. You have the facilitator. You are ready to welcome feedback from a variety of untapped sources to improve yourself and your staff professionally. Now you have the following questions to ask your contributors. The contributors are those people from the various segments of your work life who will provide feedback. You may have more than one from each segment of your work life. Although you can include everyone, there is no need to.

The facilitator now will meet with each contributor, either in person or by phone. You can use e-mail, but that will not give you the rich responses that you will get from tone, inflection, and body language. During the interviews, the facilitator's role is to record and seek clarification. It is not the role of this person to prompt, interpret, or try to change the direction of the interview. The questions are simple. Verbatim

feedback delivered without editing increases credibility. Consider the following questions for teacher interviews:

- What are _____ strengths?
- What gets in her/his way?
- What are areas of improvement?
- What advice do you have for ____?

For a supervisor's interviews you might add the following questions:

- On a scale of 1 – 10 how would you rate _____ as an administrator? (1 being ineffective and 10 being very effective)
- Whatever the response to the previous question, what is the one thing the supervisor could do to move up on this scale?

This last questions gets to the essence of the immediate change needed.

When there are similar responses, they should be noted verbatim. Again, repetition increases credibility and reinforces areas for enforcing existing strengths and improving areas where development is needed. The person receiving the 360° evaluation will have answered the same questions when they meet with the facilitator and are interviewed. Once all of the interviews are completed, the facilitator compiles all of the information. The self-review is kept separate, but is included. When there is more than one of the same responses, that will be noted.

The next part is when the facilitator meets with the person being evaluated. The person is given the written compilation to review. The facilitator is quiet as the person has a chance to read through and absorb all of this feedback. After the person is done and looks up at the facilitator, this is the signal to begin the process of reviewing the information together. I urge you not to rush through this part. Responses at this time look like this:

- Were there any surprises in your review?
- Is there anything that you need clarification on?

I suggest before you offer your staff this new evaluation tool you take the plunge yourself.

Beginnings Workshop

It is essential that you recognize that the unveiling of this approach as with any performance measurement tool may be met with fear, trepidation, reluctance, uncertainty and — from some — distrust.

- Let's look at your strengths.
- It looks like . . .
- Clearly many people here appreciate your . . .
- Take a minute and enjoy this. This is powerful feedback.
- Now let's look at areas that need improvement, what gets in your way.
- What do you think about . . . ?
- Looking at your self-review, it looks like you know about some of these areas already.
- Let's look at the advice given. What do you think about this?
- Does this look accurate to you?
- What advice do you give yourself?
- How do you feel about this?
- Do you think you can make some of these changes?
- What are you going to work on after reflecting on this review?

At this point the facilitator will clarify the next two or three steps for improvement and the meeting will close.

A technical point here is that it is important for the facilitator and staff member to sign and date both copies of the evaluation. One copy is documentation for the staff files, and the other is for the staff person's personal records. As a side note, this can be used by staff when they go on interviews (if they perceive it will be positive). It can also help you when it is time to write a recommendation letter.

Keys to success

To begin the process you have to read through the process and understand it. I strongly caution you to avoid jumping right in. Hesitations, questions, and resistance will naturally come up and if you are not

prepared for it you could lose the trust of your staff before you start. It is essential that you recognize that the unveiling of this approach as with any performance measurement tool may be met with fear, trepidation, reluctance, uncertainty and — from some — distrust. This is especially true if the appraisal system is tied to compensation. At first glance it can be quite threatening. Someone who works for me will be allowed to evaluate me? Many people report that after their first 360° they approach subsequent evaluations with positive anticipation.

I suggest before you offer your staff this new evaluation tool you take the plunge yourself. Having a 360° evaluation done on you first will go a long way to building trust with the teachers who will do this next. By doing your evaluation first, you will be sensitive to the feelings that will come up from your teachers. Feelings of self-doubt, uncertainty, eagerness to improve, hope for recognition, will be mixed in with excited anticipation. From my experience, you go back and forth almost a “they love me — they love me not” you played as a child with the petals on a daisy. You wonder if they will have the same perceptions of your strengths as you do, and then you wonder if they will remember that time you fell short of your expectations at the board meeting. You create in your mind how wonderful this evaluation will be and all of the fabulous things people will say about you, while you worry if they will remember that week when you were in an especially bad mood. And when you are first, you recognize that this means that someone else is going to be involved in a most intimate way in this new and very comprehensive evaluation of your work life. You will not have control over the data or the delivery. So tell me again why we are doing this?

You're doing this because you want candid feedback. You don't want to be in the dark. You know it will help bring about change with a positive and supportive tone. You set expectations that parents and staff will be open, honest, and constructive. And you are looking for honest and all encompassing feedback about every aspect of your job. You want to improve and you want it to be safe for your teachers to go through this process and improve themselves.

It is very important to frame the process in a way that can be viewed as a positive learning experience. By subjecting yourself first, you can speak from experience about how it helped you personally grow.

Pitfalls

There are many potential pitfalls along the way:

- If there is a sense of distrust between the administration and the teachers, the evaluation process may be viewed as threatening.
- If you have not given feedback before, this will heighten the anxiety your teachers are feeling.
- If you have not clearly explained the entire process, and taken the time to elicit questions and concerns before you start, it will not be effective.
- If you believe there is a contingent among your teaching staff who view this process as a way to 'get rid' of someone, you need to be aware of it and be careful in selecting those who will contribute to the 360°.
- An insecure director may try to use this to single out a teacher.
- Ill-intended teachers may try to use this to attack an unpopular teacher.

Those people who have difficulty giving feedback may see this as an opportunity to unload years of unsaid feedback and resentment. It is better that this comes out in a safe forum. It is my belief that if

left unaddressed this will lead to passive aggressive behavior and can sabotage your school. It is far better to put it on the table so that you can deal with it.

Follow-up

The first time you complete this process it will be more time consuming than it will be subsequently. You need to keep the 360° evaluation alive by physically keeping it in a place that is readily accessible so that you and your teachers will refer to it often. If you file it away, you will be filing away all of the opportunities for continuous improvement that this process offers.

Additional resources

International Coach Federation:

www.coachfederation.org

International Coaching Council (Executive and Business Coach Education):

www.international-coaching-council.com

Mentor Coach (Training accomplished helping professionals to become extraordinary coaches):

www.mentorcoach.com

Goldsmith, M., & Reiter, M. (2007). *What got you here won't get you there: How successful people become even more successful*. New York: Hyperion..

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What's in it for me?: As you follow Tobin's directions to explore the process fully before trying it, help all stakeholders discover how they might benefit from such a process. Break into small groups and brainstorm all the ways such feedback could be useful.

Pitfalls?: Don't hesitate to list and discuss the pitfalls. Such a discussion may be important in uncovering fears and risks as viewed by your staff before you commit to a 360° evaluation.

Finding a facilitator: Who do you and your teachers know and trust well enough to serve as a facilitator for a 360° evaluation process? Make a list of potential facilitators and then compare their credentials and professional skills to the list of required ones mentioned in the article.

Be the guinea pig: It may take a little bravery, but it will be a wonderful example. So, try it and see what you learn from a 360° evaluation. At the very least, it will identify areas for professional development for you in the future.

Using Beginnings Workshop
to Train Teachers
by Kay Albrecht