Holding Leaders Accountable During the 360° Feedback Process

Stephen F. Young, William A. Gentry, and Phillip W. Braddy
Center for Creative Leadership

We agree with Bracken, Rose, and Church (2016) and others that a critical design feature of any 360° feedback process is accountability, where the goal is "creation of sustainable individual, group, and/or organizational change in behaviors valued by the organization" (p. 764). Though we acknowledge the important roles that the organization and raters play in holding leaders accountable for their development, the goal of our commentary is to expand on how the leader's boss and other key individuals can serve as powerful sources of accountability in the 360° feedback process and throughout a leader's development journey. We also want to note that although the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) encourages leaders to share what they have learned from their 360° feedback with their bosses and other accountability partners (e.g., peers), it is the leader's choice as to whether he or she shares key feedback with others. This practice ensures confidentiality of the data, helping leaders trust the process and increasing the likelihood that individuals accept difficult feedback and use it for performance improvement (Fleenor, Taylor, & Chappelow, 2008; King & Santana, 2010).

At CCL, the 360° feedback process has long been designed to encourage leaders to involve their boss and others in their development. Bosses can strongly reinforce leaders for their development efforts from 360° feedback, and they can provide the resources needed for successful learning and change (Dragoni, Park, Soltis, & Forte-Trammell, 2014; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988; McCauley, Van Velsor, & Ruderman, 2010). Several strategies exist to increase accountability (for more detail, see Reinhold, Patterson, & Hegel, 2015). One is a key leadership challenge (KLC). Prior to receiving 360° feedback, we urge leaders to select a KLC: an existing project that aligns with the organization's strategy and that requires new approaches to be successful, one where 360° feedback could inform or suggest new approaches for dealing with it. To increase accountability, leaders should talk to their boss about the KLC before receiving 360° feedback. Bosses should see the KLC as an important one to the organization, and it should be part of the leader's work responsibilities—that is, accomplishing it should matter. This

Stephen F. Young, William A. Gentry, and Phillip W. Braddy, Global Research and Evaluation, Center for Creative Leadership, Greensboro, North Carolina.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Stephen F. Young, Global Research and Evaluation, Center for Creative Leadership, 1 Leadership Place, Greensboro, NC 27410. E-mail: youngs@ccl.org

ensures that the leader, the boss, and the organization all see this leadership development work as important.

Upon receiving his or her 360° feedback, a leader can connect with peers (or in the case of a leadership development program, in-class accountability partners) who are going through similar experiences in receiving such feedback. While examining their 360° feedback, accountability partners support the identification of strengths, development needs, and surprises in the data. On the basis of trends in the data, accountability partners can assist leaders in establishing goals related to their KLC. Accountability partners can then help participants practice new behaviors and advise each other on how to approach new situations.

To effectively integrate accountability partners during this process, practitioners must deliberately give leaders time to reflect on and discuss how their insights from their 360° feedback apply to their KLC. What strengths can they use in response to their KLC? What areas must they improve on or develop? Should they pay more attention to one rater group over another, given the context of their KLC? Practitioners can take several actions to facilitate this reflective process: Provide tools and techniques about how to apply the learning, allocate sufficient time for learners to discuss their concerns and plans for using new skills with other participants or coaches, and have participants draft an action plan for addressing their KLC along with identifying key metrics for assessing progress. Practitioners can enhance success by putting rules, expectations, and standards in place to ensure high-quality interaction. Examples include establishing clear expectations for what peer coaching is, indicating how often groups should meet, and suggesting groups "report out" on progress to others publically.

After receiving 360° feedback, we strongly encourage leaders to share the developmental goals they set, based on what they learned from the 360° feedback, with their boss and others in the organization. Conversation guides, expectations, and checklists for leaders to use with their boss should be provided in helping guide this important accountability step. Leaders' bosses must have coaching conversations with them, understand the challenges in changing leader behaviors based on 360° feedback, support their new goals and behaviors, and hold leaders accountable for applying the learning by establishing specific check-in periods to follow up on goal progress. In addition, we also encourage leaders to find an at-work learning partner who may or may not be the boss (such as a mentor, coach, human resources business partner, peer, or other trusted person). The at-work learning partner provides support for learning, helps leaders reflect on ideas and insights from the 360° feedback, and assists leaders as they apply these insights in their work context (Cromwell & Kolb, 2004). At-work learning partners can also serve as role models and provide timely, honest feedback on goal-related progress.

To make the relationship with the at-work learning partners as productive as possible, specific guidelines and questions should be provided to structure interactions. First, the leader and accountability partners should meet and agree on roles and expectations as well as decide on how often they will meet. They should also set specific developmental goals based on what the leader finds important from the 360° feedback process. For instance, the leader could ask, "When I improve in this competency and put it to use, what would you expect to see from me that I'm not doing now?" Finally, the leader and accountability partner should measure and evaluate progress based on goals set from the 360° feedback process. For example, if the leader wanted to improve on the ability to confront problem employees, he or she could ask, "Have you noticed a difference? How well do you think my plan for improving is working?"

The intent of our commentary was to expand on the critical role that bosses and others play in holding leaders accountable during the 360° feedback process. In particular, we highlighted the important role that bosses and others at work play in a leader's development journey because they are resources for change and learning and can reinforce the key developmental behaviors leaders need to possess in order to achieve greater job and career success (McCauley et al., 2010). We hope that the strategies we reviewed help practitioners maximize the impact that others can have on the 360° feedback and leadership development process.

References

Bracken, D. W., Rose, D. S., & Church, A. H. (2016). The evolution and devolution of 360° feedback. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice, 9*(4), 761–794.

Cromwell, S. E., & Kolb, J. A. (2004). An examination of work-environment support factors affecting transfer of supervisory skills training to the workplace. *Human Resource Development Quarterly, 15*, 449–471.

Dragoni, L., Park, H., Soltis, J., & Forte-Trammell, S. (2014). Show and tell: How supervisors facilitate leader development among transitioning leaders. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 99*, 66–86.

Fleenor, J. W., Taylor, S., & Chappelow, C. (2008). *Leveraging the impact of 360-degree feedback*. San Francisco, CA: Wiley.

King, S., & Santana, L. (2010). Feedback-intensive programs. In E. Van Velsor, C. McCauley, & M. Ruderman (Eds.), *The Center for Creative Leadership handbook of leadership development* (pp. 97–123). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

McCall, M., Lombardo, M., & Morrison, A. (1988). *Lessons of experience: How successful executives develop on the job*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

McCauley, C., Van Velsor, E., & Ruderman, M. (2010). Introduction: Our view of leadership development. In E. Van Velsor, C. McCauley, & M. Ruderman (Eds.), *The Center for Creative Leadership handbook of leadership development* (pp. 1–26). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Reinhold, D., Patterson, T., & Hegel, P. (2015). Make learning stick: Best practices to get the most out of leadership development. Retrieved from Center for Creative Leadership website: http://media.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/MakeLearningStick.pdf