



Dena's 'word-bites'

Leadership: Full Circle: Transformative learning and 360 degree feedback

360 degree feedback is designed to enable you to manage your behaviours, rather than allowing your behaviours to manage you.

In most organisations, competence and behavioural frameworks exist to specify the knowledge, skills and types of relationships that are necessary to reach the organisation's strategic objectives. These frameworks are often used as the basis of a 360 degree survey to harvest opinion and give feedback on the perceived capabilities and attributes of recipients. Whatever the organisational type or industry sector you belong to, they generally comprise the essential 'hard' and 'soft' skills that have been correlated with successful leadership.

Receiving 360 degree feedback can be a challenging experience; challenging because you may find that people don't see you the way you think they do – or want them to. However, in order to help you understand the perceptions of others, 360 degree feedback is extremely useful.

To conduct a 360 degree survey, feedback is systematically collected from those in your professional circle; 360 degrees around you. This feedback is then collated and presented in the form of a report. You are likely to ask your line manager, direct reports, colleagues and clients to provide this feedback; they represent the wide sweep of people who are close enough to observe you from different vantage points. These people will have firm perceptions about you and will act towards you as if their perceptions are the 'truth'. Together, these perceptions provide an indication of your 'brand'; the leadership myth or legend that is projected by you and upon you. Knowing this will help you understand the impact of what you are doing and offer you choices about which areas you'd like to improve or change.

There are many ways of conducting a 360 degree survey from the way the data is collected to the way it is delivered. Some organisations use proprietary instruments with generic leadership items on it whilst others conduct interviews

with those in close relationship to the recipient. Some use an electronic means of collecting the data whilst others prefer a paper format. In many instances, the 360 degree survey is tailored to meet the organisation's requirements and respondents complete the questionnaire on-line. The respondents' views usually come in both quantitative (points on a scale) and qualitative (written text) form and they will be given to you in one of several ways. This may be a 'drip feed' process in a small group with a facilitator, one-to-one with a personal coach or a written report which is sent to you to digest on your own.

I'm going to describe the process of receiving feedback in the group setting with a facilitator as it is more likely to set up the kinds of meaningful challenges that result in higher levels of self-awareness. This is true because multiple pairs of eyes and minds focus on your data to help you make sense of it. Also, in this setting, avoiding issues is less likely because others probably share some of the same tendencies as you and find it helpful to watch you process them! Although the experience of being witnessed receiving your 360 degree feedback can be quite intense, there is nevertheless scope for significant insight and transformative growth – for you, for your group members and for your facilitator. This growth can occur as a result of the insights you gain from the survey; especially if the perceptions contained within it are counter to what you believe to be true – or it can occur as a result of observing someone else receive their feedback. When there is a mismatch between how you see yourself and how others see you it gives you the opportunity to question why your intended messages are not being received and what you can do differently to reflect your authenticity. The realisation that your messages and behaviours are incongruent can be quite shocking and can act as a trigger to deep, deeper or deepest self-examination; the meat of personal growth and transformative learning.

In the past, transformative learning has been an unexpected and bewildering journey that has taken people into unexplored personal territory; and there have been few signposts and milestones along the way. When this happens, it can feel both confusing and threatening. If this alarms you, rest assured that there is wisdom in the process of personal development and growth and the realisations will be metered out according to your ability to digest them.

I identified the following process from a study of a dozen people who reflected upon their journeys of transformation. Through their testimonies, I was able to map the features of their journey and identify the stages that were common to all of them. The contributors to the study felt that had they been aware of the dynamics and challenges of their respective journeys, they would have been better equipped to move through them effectively and efficiently. I am outlining the stages for you, therefore, so that you don't fall into the confusion that they felt.

Before you read on, however, I must clarify one thing. I am not advocating transformative learning as the necessary or inevitable consequence of going through the 360 degree process, it is merely a possibility. However, what I am saying is that your experience in receiving this kind of feedback may reflect the general shape and direction of the process I describe.

This process is about expanding your conscious awareness and enabling you to make different choices and, although transformative change is possible, it is not the only form of valuable change. So, just as familiarity with this process will assist those of you at the more extreme end of behavioural change, it will also assist those of you who are making small shifts in your behaviours which, when added together, will inevitably result in significant change for you and your organisation. So do remember, 'Small changes make big differences and have big effects.'

The Transformative Process

Stage -1 (Unawareness – pre-feedback)

The numeric '-1' (minus one) is not used to indicate that nothing is happening, but to suggest that the process is not in the 'conscious' realm. Whatever process is taking place is subliminal, although, in retrospect, it may be obvious. This stage describes the unrecognised behavioural patterns that create (illusory?) feelings of autonomy and control, and this period endures as long as the current meaning perspective¹, or mindset, is maintained. Often those that work with you, or are nearest to you, see these behavioural patterns and occasionally, they try to reveal them to you through verbal feedback in the hope that you will see the error of your ways!

Stage 0 (Trigger)

Stage '0' is the point at which your attention is drawn to your behavioural idiosyncrasies and the consequences of them. This may be in the 360 process or through feedback mechanisms inherent in the coaching, mentoring or appraisal processes that you experience. Some people try to ignore the trigger thinking that it is easier to stay with their current behavioural patterns than to change them. However, once you have a realisation, it is impossible to 'un-have' it and eventually, you will have to heed it – unless, that is, you go into complete and perpetual denial! This stage is often experienced as 'the wake-up call'.

¹ A Meaning perspective is defined as 'a structure of assumptions that constitutes a frame of reference for interpreting the meaning of an experience'. (Mezirow, 1990: pp xvi) It is a mix of values (cultural, family and personal), beliefs, experiences and other thought patterns formed (or ill-formed) in our formative years. The meaning perspective is the lens through which we interpret our lives and our life experiences.

Stage 1 (Connecting)

During this stage of the process, you are able to look back and identify your characteristic behavioural patterns or coping strategies in a fairly objective way. It is as if the scales have fallen from your eyes and there is no denying the impact of your behavioural strategies. To perpetuate them consciously after these strategies have been revealed and acknowledged is a deliberate act of denial and one that cannot serve you if you are endeavouring to bring your full potential and authenticity to your work. Stage 1 is often considered to be the 'ah ha' moment.

Stage 2 (Disintegration)

Common to all models of transition or transformation are feelings of confusion and chaos as old behavioural patterns are dropped and there is nothing to replace them with. Transformation demands that you let go of the old in order to bring on the new. It is like a death and a rebirth; a shedding of the skin. As a result of this, it is also a process which can bring a sense of loss. This sense of loss is caused by letting go of the investment you make in who you are and how you think you are received in the world; the 'fantasy' of yourself. The qualities of courage and tenacity are undoubtedly drawn upon during this stage of the transformative process.

You may feel frustrated and angry as you begin to recognise the depth and pervasiveness of your former behavioural strategies. You may also be tempted to 'explain away' or justify the feedback you have received in order to prevent yourself from having to 'do the work' and change your approach. During this stage, you will draw upon the support of your group and facilitator. You may also be served by an external coach, mentor, friend, interest or activity; indeed, anything that provides one or two anchor points whilst you 'rewire' your thinking.

Your facilitator will know if you are courting denial as a way to smooth the passage for yourself because she or he will hear you say something like:

1. I am not surprised by any of this; I've heard it all before!
2. My respondents have not used their mother-tongue, they've misunderstood the questions!
3. It's a 'cultural' thing!
4. I've had to make a lot of changes so this isn't how I'm usually perceived!
5. They don't know me well enough. I've only been in position for six months!
6. I used to be a team-member but now I'm the boss so they're resentful!
7. They've got my strengths right but my weaknesses are wrong!

8. No-one really understands the pressure I'm being put under!
9. The Senior Managers don't know what they're doing so how can I lead!
10. They've got the scale the wrong way round!
11. This can't be my report!
12. It's not really *me*, the situation makes me act like that!

Stage 3 (Finding Voice and Being Heard)

After entering the disintegrative phase, it is important to be seen, heard and validated. Being received in confusion, and sometimes in despair, is essential if you are to proceed with your transformative journey. In a group setting, being seen, heard and validated happens by virtue of the close attention given to you by the facilitator and group members who have contracted to listen attentively and empathically. Often in these groups, the act of witnessing someone else's feedback triggers further self-realisation and builds deeper empathic connections. If this level of community and generosity is not a feature of your group, you will probably take your 'voice' elsewhere, denying everyone the richness of your personal disclosure. This is why it is so important to have an integral, trusting and safe setting in your 360 feedback group.

Stage 4 (Meaning-making)

During this stage of the process, the limitations and inadequacies of your current meaning perspective is recognised and (partially) deconstructed and reconstructed. You may find it hard to let go of your old paradigms and accept that there are different ways of viewing things. After all, your past influences and long held values and beliefs have been hidden from consciousness and have remained in place for much of your adult life. As they are an intrinsic part of you, you have probably seldom externalised or articulated them. Perhaps (unconsciously) you believed that they were reasonable and shared by many. No doubt you have heard people fight for the correctness of the views that they have inherited from their formative environments and relationships; views that they have held unquestioned for years.

Meaning-making comes from cognitive processing; 'trying new ideas out for size'. The group setting is a rich place for such exploration and, as I have already indicated, the more generous each member can be with their sharing, the more likely it is that you will gain value from the exercise.

There are other channels that inform meaning and these need to be built into the action plans that you create as a result of your feedback and desire to change. These channels include the physical, creative, emotional and spiritual expressions. So, get to the gym, paint pictures, write poetry, listen to music, meditate, walk in the mountains or learn to sing.

Stage 5 (Controlling)

Stage 5 is often contained within the action plans drawn up as a result of the 360 feedback process. It is during the controlling phase of the process that you are able to make choices in your own right and not subjugate your power to a culture, situation or person. You may also define or redefine your boundaries more clearly. In the 360 degree setting, these boundaries are often due to work/life balance issues.

In the language of developmental psychologists, growth leads to increasing autonomy or distinctness; to personal truth. The yearning to be defined by another is replaced by an ability to define oneself in the world. Developmentalists acknowledge that all growth is costly as it involves leaving behind obsolete behaviours and sometimes, relationships as well. However, the rewards of being true to oneself are many, including increased confidence and happiness.

Stage 6 (Integrating)

Although Maslow² is unhappy defining the term 'self-actualised', due to the 'static' impression it creates, he nonetheless condones use of the term 'self-actualising' to describe people that have episodic experiences of self-actualisation such as those who have achieved great insights in psychotherapy or other important growth experiences. Self-actualisation then, is 'an episode in which the powers of the person come together in a particularly efficient and intensely enjoyable way, and in which he or she is more integrated and less spilt, more open for experience, more creative, more humorous, more ego-transcending, more independent of his or her lower needs and more perfectly expressive, spontaneous and fully functioning. Indeed, in these episodes of self-actualisation you become, 'more truly yourself, more perfectly actualising in your potentialities, closer to the core of your Being, more fully human.'

The integration stage of the process often occurs after the programme as new concepts and behaviours are woven into your newly constructed meaning perspective and become habitual or 'normal' to you. There is a 'naturalness' in your new modus operandi and you will probably feel, and experience 'more comfortable in your skin'. You are now well on the road to authentic leadership.

² Maslow, A. H. (1968, 1999) *Toward a Psychology of Being*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc (1968: pp 106-107)

Stage 7 (Distancing)

This is the final stage of 'letting go'. The term 'dis-identify' has been used by some theorists in different contexts to describe this process of letting go of, and transcending, the former meaning perspective and its consequent behavioural patterns. Indeed, this stage leaves you clear for the next iteration of the process and yes, there are many iterations in a lifetime

Be aware that your journey along the transformative path will be very personal. There are bound to be subtleties and undercurrents along the way that will differ from others who respond to the call to change. This is not to say that the stages are not common in most people's experience, it's just that the landscape at each stage may look a little different. Each person's approach to the challenges they face is unique, yet the nature of the challenges are likely to be the same.

It might be helpful to view the model described above and graphically presented below as a roadmap complete with signposts, hazard warnings and a description of the terrain. The map helps make sense of a journey but it is not the journey; it is merely a guide to reduce uncertainty and to accompany you in your periodic yet inevitable feelings of confusion.

More can be said of the transformative process but above all, I would like to champion the natural wisdom of the process and urge you to trust it as it unfolds. The rewards are many and they don't stop with the first iteration; the gifts continue for as long as you step consciously along the path to realise and release your essential Self.

Finally

Most often, people experience stages 1 – 4 in the 360 degree feedback groups. But let me say, this process stands or falls by the level of trust and confidentiality that is agreed and reached in the group. This is an intensely personal journey and any risk of your information leaking from the group will only inhibit the process. So, it is important to respect and preserve others privacy as they engage with their feedback.