



WHITE PAPER

# Leverage the Impact of 360 Assessment: *Invest in Feedback Coaching*

*Author: Barbara Smith, ICF International Organizational Research, Learning, and Performance*

## Abstract

A **compass** is an instrument used for navigation and orientation that shows direction relative to the geographic cardinal directions or “points.” The compass face has abbreviations for the directions North, South, East, and West. The face can be aligned with the corresponding geographic directions. North corresponds to geographical or true north, or zero degrees, and the angles increase clockwise. East is 90 degrees, South is 180 degrees, and West is 270 degrees—and then back to North or 360 degrees.

So what do a compass and a 360-degree (360) assessment have in common? A compass provides navigators with various points of information needed to stay on course to reach a target destination. A 360 assessment gives individuals points of data about their job skills, abilities, and behaviors from multiple perspectives. They can use this information to plan a course of action forward to guide personal and professional development. Often referred to as a “full circle” assessment, a 360 assessment typically includes feedback from an individual’s supervisor, colleagues, and subordinates as well as a self-assessment completed by the individual.

For most 360 assessments, the feedback is anonymous. Feedback typically includes numerical ratings assigned to specific behaviors by various raters as well as written answers to open-ended questions. Feedback is compiled into one cohesive report that enables individuals to compare and contrast multiple views of themselves from multiple perspectives.

## Where is the payoff from a 360 assessment?

Numerous articles discuss how to gain the most from a 360 assessment. For example, “Improving the Payoff from 360-Degree Feedback,” published in the *Human Resources Planning Journal*,<sup>1</sup> describes a research study that explored 43 global organizations with similar 360 assessment approaches. Researchers identified six critical best practices that organizations use to get the most out of a 360 assessment. Many practices focus on planning and administering the assessment (e.g., choosing the appropriate assessment, selecting the assessment participants, setting a realistic assessment timetable, and other important factors). However, the research concludes that organizations gained the most from a 360 assessment and leveraged their investment by using coaching as their principal strategy in the 360 feedback interpretation process.

## What is ICF’s experience with 360 assessment?

ICF International (ICF) experts are highly skilled in partnering with organizations on 360 assessments, both at the strategic and operational level. They assist organizations in planning 360 assessments that support overall human capital strategic planning. They manage entire 360 assessment projects, ranging from instrument selection to planning and administration, participant and rater training, interpretation coaching for participants, and evaluation of findings.

ICF’s assessment experts are both experienced and certified in using a number of highly reputable commercial tools. Although dozens of 360 assessment instruments exist in the marketplace, some organizations elect to develop a customized instrument. ICF has guided organizations to select an “off the shelf” or customized 360 assessment instrument with



*The 360 coaching process supports individuals' discovery of what successful behavior looks like and what actions are needed for positive change.*

several important features. First, the instrument identifies competencies—most frequently, leadership competencies—important to an organization's success, values, strategies, goals, and culture. Next, the instrument is grounded both in sound research and an underlying model, and it provides normative comparisons that enable individuals to assess how they compare with similar groups. Finally, report formats present results clearly, and user-friendly interpretation guidance is available.

### Does coach-facilitated 360 feedback vary?

Coach-facilitated 360 feedback discussions take place in a number of formats. With one health care policy and research organization, two ICF skilled and certified 360 feedback coaches held interpretation workshops in which leaders were presented a step-by-step process for interpreting sample 360 feedback. What followed were individual discussions between a coach and leader in which each leader examined and gained perspective from his or her individual 360 report. Coaching centered on targeting areas of development and crafting development plans that used a format provided by the commercial company from which the organization purchased the assessment.

Much of ICF's 360 feedback coaching is provided through individual engagements that involve longer-term coaching conducted over a period of between 2 and 12 months. This format is effective in longer-term leadership development programs and in programs designed only for coaching. As an example, for several years we have provided long-term coaching to a scientific organization where 360 assessments are typically conducted early in the coaching engagement. Coaching supports leaders in understanding their strengths and development needs and deciding on the high-impact leadership changes they want to make. Continuous and follow-up coaching gives executives the opportunity to implement a plan of action for change and to measure and maintain progress over time.

### CASE IN POINT

One of the organization's executives completed a 360 assessment before coaching began. He had been promoted recently from a highly technical scientific position to a senior-level leader and part of an executive leadership team. Coaching supported the executive to examine both new behaviors required as a leader and behaviors no longer as critical—then to examine the 360 assessment results to help prioritize a plan for development. The coach and executive planned meaningful actions, with ongoing conversations that built new skills and increased self-learning and confidence. After coaching began, the executive was promoted once again. By examining the initial 360 assessment results with his coach, the executive was able to self-assess how to fine-tune and expand one of the behaviors essential for success in the new position.

### Coaching and 360 feedback coaching: Is there a difference?

In longer-term coaching engagements, effective coaches become partners with the individuals they coach, encouraging them to reach their own conclusions about needed change and inspiring them to take meaningful actions to effect that change. This partnership also is important to the success of 360 feedback coaching. However, 360 feedback coaches also possess specific qualifications, expertise, and experience with the instrument used in the assessment. These coaches are able to help individuals interpret results and take follow-up actions.

#### *Assessment Instrument Proficiency*

Effective 360 feedback coaches know the leadership model on which a particular 360 assessment is based. They can both explain and discuss the data presentation displays, numeric scales, normative comparisons, formats of the



replies to open-ended questions, and other aspects of a feedback report. For example, in a recent 360 feedback coaching session, an ICF coach met with a senior leader who was uncomfortable with getting his assessment results. He challenged the assessment instrument and data displays, particularly the comparison of his personal data with normative data. Before the leader was willing to discuss his own report, the coach clarified sources of the normative data. Then the coach asked, *“What might be a benefit for you to compare your data to normative group data?”* The leader said, *“I imagine the comparison might give me another way to see my strengths and weaknesses.”* With the leader’s shift in perspective about the assessment data and the coach’s ability to address the leader’s concerns about the instrument, the leader and the coach were able to examine feedback data more productively.

### *Coaching Proficiency*

Most publishers of commercial assessment instruments require feedback coaches to become certified to administer and facilitate the interpretation process. Once certified, feedback coaches use the professional coaching competencies that are defined by the International Coach Federation. Foundational to these competencies is the International Coach Federation’s Code of Ethics. In 360 feedback coaching, confidentiality is paramount. Without complete trust that the 360 feedback report and coaching conversation around it are confidential, coaches may face resistance from individuals receiving feedback.

For many years, ICF has supported the Center for Army Leadership training of 360 feedback coaches to lead assessment interpretation sessions using the Army-researched and -designed 360 assessment: the Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback (MSAF) instrument. Significantly, our custom-designed training and delivery focuses not only on the MSAF’s model of leadership, the assessment instrument features, and report formats, but also on how to plan for and conduct effective 360 feedback coaching.



During the training, the participating coaches practice face-to-face and telephone coaching. They receive feedback from coach observers who evaluate coaching skills and abilities, using International Coach Federation competencies. ICF also has a cadre of coaches who, along with the Army-trained coaches, conduct telephone and in-person coaching for Army civilians and military leaders in interpreting their report results and developing individual development plans (IDPs).



If you were an observer in our MSAF 360 coach training or if you observed our skilled and experienced ICF 360 feedback coaches, you would see them demonstrate coaching competence in the following ways:

International Coach Federation Competency	Examples of Effective Coaching
Establishing the Coaching Agreement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Helps a leader identify and confirm the outcomes of the 360 feedback coaching session and why they are important.</li> <li>▪ Keeps the feedback session on track to achieve expressed outcomes.</li> </ul>
Establishing Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Establishes a safe and trusting space for delivery of the feedback, using a respectful and judgment-free tone.</li> <li>▪ Encourages and supports a leader to express ideas about the meaning of the assessment data and his/her concerns.</li> </ul>
Coaching Presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Responds and supports a leader's growth through encouraging comments and observations.</li> <li>▪ Notices a leader's responses to the 360 data and feedback discussion (e.g., open, worried, or resistant) and is able to discuss these responses and their impact on the discussion.</li> </ul>
Active Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Observes and inquires about the leader's language, tone, pace, silence, and responses.</li> <li>▪ Clarifies and summarizes the leader's thinking, behaviors, and self-observations.</li> <li>▪ Listens, giving a leader time to talk and answer.</li> </ul>
Powerful Questioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Asks open-ended questions that increase new ways of thinking about the feedback data and seeing own strengths and needs; increases a leader's confidence and commitment for follow-up action.</li> <li>▪ Through targeted questions, helps a leader decide high-priority development objectives and create a plan forward.</li> </ul>
Direct Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Communicates specific 360 assessment instrument details (e.g., scoring framework, data presentation formats, and graphics) with clarity.</li> <li>▪ Makes observations and comments to support a leader's learning, offering encouragement to set priorities and move forward.</li> <li>▪ Gives direct and honest feedback that increases leader understanding of how to use feedback comments.</li> <li>▪ Encourages a leader to do most of the talking.</li> </ul>
Creating Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Notices when a leader gains a new insight about his/her strengths and development needs.</li> <li>▪ Asks a leader what he/she learned from the feedback report.</li> <li>▪ Offers ideas and options to increase a leader's self-understanding; asks for feedback on ideas and suggestions.</li> </ul>
Designing Actions, Planning and Goal Setting, and Managing Progress and Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Offers to brainstorm with a leader on developmental actions, resources, and training.</li> <li>▪ Provides an individual development planning template that documents one to three leadership skills and abilities to be developed, approaches to development (e.g., practice, study, and getting feedback), resources needed, a timetable for action, and other planning elements.</li> <li>▪ Asks and discusses with a leader how they can and will be accountable for follow-through on planned actions.</li> </ul>



ICF follows a process for conducting 360 feedback sessions that takes into account readiness and willingness of each individual to examine the feedback, plan change, and take action.

and discuss the 360 patterns and trends by rater group, move on to address the gaps, and then narrow the focus toward more immediate, high-priority, and important areas. **Development Planning** and **Creating Plan/IDP** would follow.

Alternatively, if an individual has reviewed the 360 feedback report thoroughly, understands it, and has zeroed in on targeted areas for development, the coaching conversation might well begin with **Development Planning**. This step would include crafting specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, and timely (SMART) development goals and developmental activities. The coach also would incorporate a discussion on the **Data Information** by exploring how the 360 feedback informed the individual to select the targeted developmental areas. Also, the discussion might include work-related **Other Issues** or situations that would be improved by activities selected in the **Development Planning** step.

In many 360 feedback sessions we have held, individuals came to the discussion wanting or needing to focus on some **Other Issues** not directly related to the 360 feedback. **Other Issues** brought to sessions can be wide and varied; e.g., how to begin a new highly complex, demanding assignment; stress related to a computer glitch that just occurred before the session; the desire to make the case to attend a long-term training program; or how to deal with a problem employee. For 360 feedback conversations to be effective, a coach begins the session by addressing the **Other Issues** and linking the conversation to **Data Information** and **Development Planning**. ICF coaches are skilled in integrating the 360 data into the conversation through asking questions such as “*What development area in your 360 feedback report might help you address this issue?*” or by making observations such as “*Seems like several comments relate to your strength in influencing others. How might you use that strength to make your case?*”

Effective 360 feedback sessions close with **Creating a Plan/IDP**. Many organizations encourage or require individuals to create an IDP as a result of the feedback coaching. ICF feedback coaches apply their knowledge about developmental approaches and resources to support individuals in crafting realistic and practical IDPs, complete with defined action items. Whether an IDP is produced during feedback coaching or specific actions are defined and planned during the session, individuals leave feedback coaching with a clear path forward.

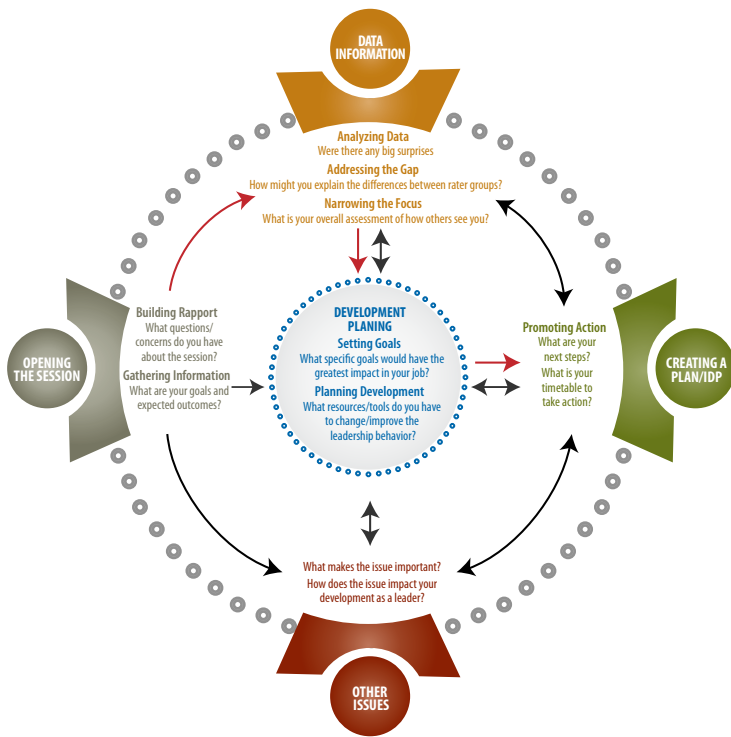


Figure 1. ICF 360 Feedback Process

A coach begins a 360 feedback discussion by **Opening the Session**, establishing rapport, creating a safe (confidential) setting for examining the report data, and clarifying expectations. Because individuals come to coaching with different levels of preparation, desired outcomes, and concerns, ICF coaches navigate a 360 feedback discussion in various ways.

After the session opens, feedback coaching may follow one of several paths: **Data Information**, **Development Planning**, or **Other Issues**. Because coaching is a conversation, feedback sessions typically address all of these paths, just in a different order. For example, after the session opens, a coaching discussion may begin with and follow the (red) path of **Data Information**, **Development Planning**, and **Creating a Plan/IDP**. This path makes sense when an individual has questions or concerns about the data, does not understand the data, or has not reviewed the feedback reports thoroughly. The coach and individual would examine





### Interpretation Session Proficiency

After a recent 360 assessment project ICF conducted with a government agency, we collected feedback from 54 leaders who participated in assessment and feedback coaching. Examples of written comments that pointed out the value of the coaching follow:

- *“Have done 360 before; they always have so much information. The coaching part really helped me understand all the data and quickly get to the major area I wanted to work on.”*
- *“Coaching discussion will help me when I change to a new duty station. I have a plan for how to use my communication strengths to quickly build a strong peer network.”*

### Does 360 feedback matter?

Feedback is a critical component of personal and professional development. By gaining a perspective from others on a 360 assessment, individuals gain awareness of their strengths and challenges. In many cases, 360 feedback is the first time a leader receives specific, structured feedback on what they are doing well and where they need to improve, particularly around targeted leadership competencies important to the organization.

Without feedback, a leader’s view of his or her professional abilities, personal capacity, and competence may be unclear, unconfirmed, and, at the worst, unknown. Without feedback, leaders may not recognize when new behaviors, skills, or perspectives are needed nor know how to develop them.

Blind spots are one of the biggest career derailers. The adage, *“What you don’t know can’t hurt you,”* is not helpful for aspiring leaders or individuals in need of development. A 360 assessment can be an eye-opener that jump starts development and accelerates performance improvement. The following excerpt from a coaching conversation between a senior leader and her ICF coach illustrates this point:

**Setting:** Prior to meeting with her coach, the leader received her feedback report with the

following written comments: *“Driving to results style alienates others,” “Is blind to the impact of her style on others,” and “Has little time for people issues.”* The leader was surprised and upset by these comments.

- **Leader:** *“I am really surprised by these comments. I can’t imagine who would say that.”*
- **Coach:** *“What surprised you?”*
- **Leader:** *“I am all about results and want to get the most out of my staff. I thought everyone knew that. Also, my supervisor gave me a great review.”*
- **Coach:** *“You sound troubled. What upsets you about the comments?”*
- **Leader:** *“It bothers me that other people see me in this way. Also, I’m annoyed that I was blind to what others were thinking.”*  
**Coach:** *“How important is it for you to change the way others see you?”*
- **Leader:** *“Very! If I am really alienating people, they will leave. In fact, one of my staff took a lateral position in another division last month, and another just told me he is applying for other jobs.”*
- **Coach:** *“OK, let’s take a deeper look at the report; it may help to better understand these comments. Turn to page 3 of the report and look at the People Leadership competency and six rated behaviors.”*
- (Coach and Leader turn to 360 feedback report where specific People Leadership behaviors were rated.)
- **Coach:** *“What do you notice about how each of the rater groups rated the six People Leadership behaviors?”*
- **Leader:** *“Well, it looks like my direct reports rated me on every behavior well below the norm. Look at how low these behaviors are rated: ‘Cares about the well-being of employees,’ ‘Takes other peoples viewpoints into account,’ and ‘Motivates employees to do their best work.’ That’s a surprise, too. My supervisor, peers, and self-ratings for the behaviors are all pretty high.”*

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- **Coach:** *“What might these data tell you?”*
- **Leader:** *“Looks like I am more driven toward results, and I don’t take my employees into account. The comments seem to say that, too.”*

As the session continues, the coach and leader discuss the value and importance of this feedback and the consequence of not addressing it. At the close of the discussion, the leader commits to take two immediate actions: first, to thank her staff for their feedback and share her 360 feedback results with them; second, to set up monthly “listening meetings” to listen and learn from employees’ ideas and suggestions. She also thought this action might lead to even greater results.

ICF coaches encourage individuals to examine their feedback results in the context of their current work situations and consider action steps that have more immediate value. If a 360 assessment is deployed as part of a longer term leadership development program, coaches also support individuals to examine results in terms of both current and future skills important for longer term success.

### Closing thoughts: What to consider?

We have heard some troubling stories about 360 assessment projects. One story told of an organization that conducted an assessment, then printed out the feedback reports, and left them on each participating leader’s desk. In another, an organization’s leaders received their feedback report electronically, along with a one-page summary on tips for report interpretation. In both of these cases, leaders were basically left on their own

to interpret the report and plan meaningful follow-up actions, based on their understanding of the feedback.

ICF’s experience with 360 feedback coaching has led us to develop and use a systematic four-step process (KNOW, EXPAND, PLAN, and DO) that takes advantage of the power of coaching and emphasizes the partnership between the coach and the individual leader:

- **KNOW:** Gain understanding and acceptance of the feedback results as a valuable “gift” for development.
- **EXPAND:** Increase awareness for how one is perceived and determine the value and conditions necessary for behavioral change.
- **PLAN:** Plan meaningful, high-priority actions to develop new behaviors.
- **DO:** Commit to action and change (most successful with follow-up coaching discussions that both evaluate progress and promote developmental momentum).

One closing thought: The value of a 360 assessment is well known, specifically when report interpretation is coupled with follow-up feedback coaching. However, keep in mind the importance of setting realistic expectations. Behavioral change comes slowly and can be difficult—setbacks occur, and sometimes change is not possible. As Kenneth Nowak, whose latest research on 360 assessment appears in the *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*,<sup>2</sup> says, “We can’t take someone from one extreme to the other. But they can change their behavior in ways that make a difference in interactions in the work place.” That change is itself a worthwhile goal, a positive “true North” that can be achieved through a 360 assessment and coaching support.

### ICF International Leadership Development, 360 Assessment, and Coaching Capabilities

ICF supports government, commercial, and nonprofit organizations in the full lifecycle of leadership development and 360 assessment programs—from strategic advice for succession planning, assessment planning, and administration through the design and implementation of short- and long-term leadership development programs with embedded 360 assessments, design and delivery of 360 assessment projects with interpretative coaching, training for 360 feedback coaches, longer term individual coaching for employees and supervisors, and program evaluation. Our



customers include the Center for Army Leadership, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), National Science Foundation (NSF), Federal Student Aid, and other public and private sector organizations. ICF's 360 assessment, coaching, and leadership development experts are supported by our subject matter experts on energy, environment, transportation, social programs, health care, defense, and homeland security to ensure that our recommendations are carefully tailored to the needs of the organization.

ICF itself embraces 360 assessment and feedback coaching as part of our business model. Each year, high-potential managers and professionals are selected for the Executive Leadership program. Assessment instruments play a key role in the program. Participants complete a battery of assessments, including a 360 assessment, then meet for a series of coaching sessions with professional coaches who help interpret results and construct a comprehensive executive leadership plan. We regularly evaluate the overall program and the benefit of the assessment instrument to ensure effectiveness and alignment with organizational objectives.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Rogers, Evelyn; Rogers, Charles W.; Metlay, William (2002). Improving the Payoff from 360-Degree Feedback. *Human Resource Planning Journal* 25(3); 44–55.

<sup>2</sup> Nowack, Kenneth M. (2009). Leveraging Multirater Feedback to Facilitate Successful Behavioral Change. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research* 61(4); 280–297.

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### About the Author

This paper was written by Barbara Smith from ICF's Organizational Research, Learning, and Performance division, a group comprising more than 150 human capital consultants. Ms. Smith served for more than 25 years in the Federal Government and applies her human capital skills and leadership coaching expertise to projects for such clients as DoD, NASA, NSF, National Institutes of Health (NIH), U.S. Coast Guard, and the U.S. Department of Education. Ms. Smith is a Professional Certified Coach with the International Coach Federation and is certified to administer and interpret numerous commercial and custom-designed 360 assessment instruments. She coaches leaders at all levels, including leaders in long-term development programs. She is chair of the International Coach Federation's North East Regional Advisory Council and recent past president of the Metro DC chapter. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of ICF International.

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