

# Leadership Takes Courage



by Paul A. Homoly, D.D.S.

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*"Courage is the first of human qualities because it is the quality which guarantees all others."*

Winston Churchill

Imagine that there was a way for you to discover how your team members see you as a leader. I'm not talking about a blatant complaint or a placating pat on the back. Rather, I mean a candid, detailed appraisal of your leadership and managerial skills. If you could read the minds of your team members and learn how they really see you as a leader, would you do it? Weak leaders would not—they would avoid trying to understand their team and expect others to follow simply because they're the "boss." Strong leaders, however, would seek to understand their followers and have the courage to develop into a leader whom others would *want* to follow. Which kind of leader are you?

If you want to understand how your team sees you as a leader and have the courage to grow your leadership skills, then you will want to participate in a 360-degree feedback assessment.

## **360-DEGREE FEEDBACK IN LEADER DEVELOPMENT**

In a nutshell, a "360-degree feedback" is a method of systematically collecting assessments about your leadership performance from those who know you well and comparing it with your self-assessment. Nearly all Fortune 500 companies leaders use some form of 360-degree feedback on a regular basis. Here's how it works.

Typically, the person being assessed (the "participant") selects about five team members and/or peers ("raters") to participate in the feedback process. Working individually, the raters and participant complete surveys designed to collect information about the participant's specific skills or behaviors that are important to leadership effectiveness within the practice. Raters' assessments are strictly anonymous to ensure their honesty.

After the raters complete the surveys, they return them to a centralized location for scoring. A report is compiled and delivered to a feedback facilitator. The participant and the facilitator meet and review the results. The facilitator, usually someone who has experience with this particular instrument, helps the participant understand what the various scores mean. The participant then uses this feedback to establish a developmental path geared toward increasing his or her effectiveness.

The 360-degree assessment provides feedback on your own and your followers' perceptions. The true element of challenge is that this process forces you to examine the perceptions of your raters and, more importantly, the gaps between your self-perceptions and the perceptions of your raters.

Dr. Susan Maples of Holt, Michigan, my collaborator and co-presenter in our leadership curriculum says, *"By definition our leadership performance can only be measured by our followers. Because most of us are completely unaccustomed to receiving feedback from our team members, we lead our teams with a natural handicap. Team leadership is a place where a bit of self-consciousness, as to how our behaviors are perceived by others, is a good thing! I call it developing a 'healthy skepticism.'*"

## ASSESSMENT

The assessment aspect of the 360-degree feedback has two distinguishing characteristics: it is formal and it comes from multiple perspectives.

**Formal feedback.** In the daily hustle of a dental practice, most of the feedback dentists receive is informal. This informal feedback comes to you casually—it's often given indirectly but even when it's direct, you are usually preoccupied with something else. For example, as you dash into your office to take a telephone call, your assistant reminds you that you still haven't posted the team meeting agenda as promised. In other words, small bits of informal feedback float around you all the time but can easily go unheeded in the rush of a busy schedule.

The formal 360-degree feedback may be the only time that many dentists consciously stop and take stock of their leadership effectiveness. The formal structure is a way of collecting and compiling data and provides an opportunity to reflect on what the information means. As we are the business owner, our team members are typically not in the position to give us formal feedback. They don't schedule job reviews for us, we do it for them. Consider too, the concern that any direct criticism of the boss may be detrimental to their job security.

**Multiple perspectives.** I've heard it said that, *"If one person tells you that your remind him of a horse's ass you can ignore him. If 10 people tell you the same thing, you probably ought to get fitted for a saddle."* There is strength in numbers. Dentists who receive 360-degree feedback can be jarred to attention about their shortcomings by consensus among their team members and peers. They also can enjoy

a big boost in their confidence when they learn about their strengths.

## CHALLENGE

The process of a 360-degree assessment is a source of challenge. Dr. Maples states, *"This is tough work. Receiving honest feedback is uncomfortable at best. It can make us weak-kneed and queasy, but it is absolutely vital to high-impact leadership performance. 360-degree feedback is all about uncovering our 'blind spots,' the weaknesses we don't even know we have, and coping with self-knowledge. You see when we begin to uncover the discrepancies between our own perceptions of our behavior (which often matches our intentions more than our actions) and the perceptions of our followers, we will be challenged in a new way and become perpetual students of our own followers."*

Dan Goleman, in *Working with Emotional Intelligence* (Bantam), describes self-knowledge as one of the pillars of emotional intelligence, along with self-control, empathy, and social skills. Emotional intelligence is a *meta-ability*; that is, it determines how well we can use whatever other skills we have, including our intellect. According to Goleman, *"In careers like engineering, law, medicine, where professional selection focuses almost exclusively on intellectual abilities, emotional intelligence carries much more weight than IQ in determining who emerges as a leader."* (p.19)

The 360-degree assessment sheds such light on your true strengths and weaknesses that it illuminates the developmental path you need to follow. Will there be work to do on your leadership path? Absolutely. But working smarter, not harder, will bring significant rewards in short order.

### CASE STUDIES

In the spring of 2003, Dr. Maples and I facilitated MEPS™, a 360-degree assessment (Human Synergetics International; Plymouth, MI), for seven dentists. MEPS™ measures 14 leadership competencies in three areas: task skills, personal skills, and interpersonal skills. Each dentist rated himself or herself and each was rated by his or her team members. The results of the MEPS™ survey revealed the differences between how the dentists scored themselves and how the teams scored them.

Here is part of a sample report from MEPS™.

#### Task Skills

MEPS Skill Area		20 40 60 80				Asset	Percentile
		Liability	Benchmark				
Problem Solving	Self					Benchmark	85
	Others						52
Time Management	Self					Benchmark	65
	Others						44
Planning	Self					Benchmark	52
	Others						57
Goal Setting	Self					Benchmark	97
	Others						55
Performance Leadership	Self					Potential	92
	Others					Asset	72
Organizing	Self					Benchmark	91
	Others						49
Average Task Score	Self					Benchmark	83
	Others						53

This section of MEPS™ measures task skills, six of the 14 items compiled by the MEPS™ report. The blue bar represents the dentist's self-rating; the red bar represents the cumulative rating of the dentist's team. A score of seven is the best rating, with zero being the worst. It is common for the dentists to rate themselves higher than the raters do (the "halo" effect). An area where the dentist's self-rating is considerably higher than the team's rating reveals a potential "blind spot." In the above ratings of goal-setting and organizing, blind spots may exist.

#### Personal Skills

MEPS Skill Area		20 40 60 80				Asset	Percentile
		Liability	Benchmark				
Stress Processing	Self					Benchmark	61
	Others						50
Maintaining Integrity	Self					Benchmark	60
	Others						58
Commitment	Self					Potential	49
	Others					Liability	27
Average Personal Score	Self					Benchmark	51
	Others						45

Another example of MEPS™ ratings are the three areas of personal skills. In this example, the greatest difference between the dentist's and team's rating is in the area of commitment. Every dentist in our facilitation experienced some shock, anger, and disappointment when they saw areas where their team rated them significantly lower than they rated themselves. Remember, the tough part about knowing what other people think of us

is having the courage to do something about it. Each participant in our workshop, after processing the responses, selected two areas of concern, set goals, assembled an action plan to strengthen weak areas, and teamed up with an "accountability partner" in the workshop to help them stay on track.

## RESULTS

Three of the dentists who participated in the 360-degree assessment are Dr. Erica Mason (Midlothian, VA), Dr. Gerilyn Alfe (Chicago, IL), and Dr. Eugene Ingles (Libertyville, IL).

Dr. Mason says, "The 360-degree assessment is the way to go to learn about yourself. I don't think everyone is ready for this sort of thing, but I was ready to get to the next level and this tool has become another rung on the ladder."

"I was surprised at my ratings. The two areas it indicated that I needed the most work on were stress processing and integrity. I knew I had stress issues but I was bothered by the fact that my staff rated me low in integrity. Integrity as measured by this assessment means doing what you say you're going to do. Apparently when I'm stressed out, I don't always listen too well and do things that

the team interprets as not following through on my word."

"After the workshop I told my team that I wanted their help in my goal of being better at stress processing. I defined areas that make my stress levels go up. Areas that especially stress me are hygiene patients needing short procedures and emergencies that knock me off my schedule. My team and I agreed to give me at least 30 minutes warning that I may need to spend more time with a patient; that way I can avoid the surprises that add to my stress. I'm confident by working on my stress management that my team's perception of my integrity will rise. When I'm less stressed I'm more approachable, I listen better, and there are fewer surprises for me and my team."

Dr. Alfe says, "This assessment is exactly the type of thing that I need to do every year. Since I've recently relocated, I'm working with a new team now and we're still learning each other's ways. I am really a higher energy person and that can be good and bad when relating to team members. You never know what your team is thinking and an assessment like this gets the conversation flowing and helps everyone understand each other better. That's good for us and the patient."

Dr. Ingles reports, "I've always believed that there are two types of lead-

ers. Some lead by example, others lead by what they say. I've always been the type to lead by example. The MEPS™ assessment told me I needed help in the area of team development which meant I needed to be more verbal—lead by what I say."

"Following the workshop I had a 3.5 hour staff meeting and told them about my workshop experience. I told them I wanted to be better as a leader and asked for their help. Thinking back on that conversation, I felt more vulnerable with my staff than I've ever been. We talked about a lot of things, including systems, scheduling, new patients, and occlusion. My team loves being part of something different and this heart-to-heart meeting helped us get better aligned. That evening a team member called me at home and thanked me for having a great meeting. That's never happened before and I hope it happens again."

Columnist and author Erma Bombeck said, "It takes a lot of courage to show your dreams to someone." Participating in a 360-assessment and returning to your team to ask for their support helps everyone in the office to create their goal of meaningful, satisfying work. 

