



Using 360 degrees to get a 180-degree turnaround – a case study

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Faced with three under-performing teams, my client used 360-degree processes to get both team managers and their teams to identify and set their own performance improvement goals. She used coaching rather than the prevailing directive style to get them to take ownership of the processes. She tells the story here.

In January 2002 I began a new job as a director of commercial activity within a large organisation, with responsibility for three seriously under-performing teams whose members' morale was low, and who felt under-valued and detached from the rest of the organisation.

What did we do?

The first step was to find out how the teams worked. Although the prevailing culture was directive, I thought it important to get team members actively engaged in solving their own performance problems. Members of all three teams completed a teamindex 360° survey – an online confidential questionnaire – to assess how well they thought the teams were working in terms of four broad headings: purpose, resources, systems and relationships. They responded to 72 positive statements using a rating scale of 1 to 7, 7 being the most positive.

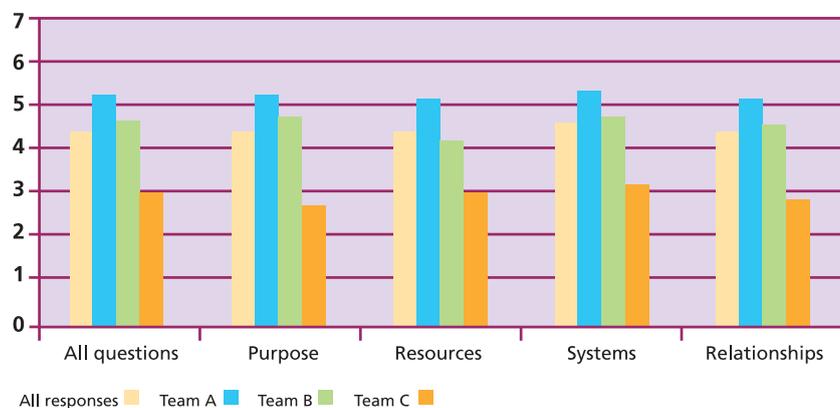
The results showed stark differences between the three teams.

- Team A's responses were positive; this was clearly a well-managed and happy group.
- Team B had both strengths and weaknesses.
- Team C was dysfunctional, with problems of leadership, working practices and the degree to which they felt valued and respected.

Coaching the managers

The teams' performance managers had very different styles.

Team A's manager was a perfectionist who expected perfection from her two team leaders. Her days were spent fighting fires and micro-managing. She didn't trust the team leaders to deliver without being chased and harried; they acquiesced and relied on her to solve their problems for them. She was becoming bored and negative. One of the team leaders was new and his laid-back style clearly irritated her. The other was reluctant to take on new challenges, sure that she would not live up to expectations.





The experience of being coached makes effective coaches

Team B's manager, who was new to management, found herself with two team leaders who were both older than she was and both confrontational. One was disorganised and emotional; the other verged on being a bully. While both were reasonably competent, Manager B needed to help them recognise their own failings and motivate them to address the problems. She was worried that her lack of experience would undermine her authority and credibility with them.

Team C's manager was an accountant who had been with the organisation a long time. Although appointed to manage a unit, he possessed no real commitment or aptitude. He relied on a team leader to handle HR issues, but she would soon be eligible for retirement. Deeply analytical and uncommunicative, he saw me, the new director, as a potentially dangerous and threatening animal.

Getting buy-in

Team members completed the [teamindex360©](#), honestly assessing their strengths and weaknesses. Once they understood what those

were, action plans and the steps for achieving goals were agreed by the teams. The self-respect and autonomy achieved in stepping away from a hierarchical culture ensured teams' active commitment to the change process.

The change programme

Team A required just a light touch to encourage the manager to delegate and allow staff to develop. Team B needed some restructuring, clarification of roles, improvements to working practices and recognition of the team's contribution to the whole organisation.

Team C identified their problems, but finding solutions was harder. Drastic remedies were needed, so I led a root-and-branch restructuring, with new job descriptions, working procedures and systems – and early retirement for the team leader who had been shielding her manager from staff management responsibilities. A formal assessment process took place in the context of the new positions, several temporary positions were made permanent and new people, unhindered

by the legacy of the past, were recruited. Key to all this was involving the manager in the change process.

My coaching challenge

My usual management style is to fix problems – but I wanted to use coaching as a technique to get team members to work through the problems themselves.

The teams assessed my coaching strengths and weaknesses by completing a [coachingindex360©](#) feedback appraisal. Most had no

prior experience of being coached, and I was aware that all too easily team managers would look to me to take the decisions and tell them what to do. The results highlighted that I needed to ask myself:

- Do I spend enough time coaching? Am I enthusiastic about it? Does this come across to others?
- Do I put time aside specifically for planning and preparation?
- Do I need support in thinking through and planning scenarios that coachees can use to practise their skills?
- Am I using appropriate influencing skills with each of my coachees?
- My coachees would like me to be more 'available at a distance' for coaching and advice. Do I make it part of my normal routine to keep in touch with my coachees and discuss matters with them informally?

The coaching relationships

To get managers' buy-in I arranged a series of one-to-ones where my goal was to obtain their commitment to a

programme of coaching meetings and to get them each to agree a specific coaching contract.

Team C's manager found the idea of a formal coaching relationship threatening. He saw a need for coaching as a weakness and wanted my relationship with him to be that of line manager. I decided to go with it, as building trust was more important than formal procedures.

Team A's manager accepted the contract and agreed to work on her delegation skills, but her reluctance to let go of the detail meant there was a danger that coaching sessions would be used by her for nitpicking and complaints. I had to ensure the coaching and line management relationships with her were kept entirely separate.

Team B's manager welcomed the coaching contract, and asked for it to focus on handling difficult people. The coaching relationship started well. There was mutual respect and a compatibility of communication styles. We quickly found we didn't need formal meetings as daily contact kept the issues alive and allowed us to respond as situations arose. The line management relationship itself became a coaching relationship.

Supervision

Using the coachingindex360©, I realised that in order to be able to coach three such different people I needed my own coach. I turned to an experienced external consultant, and in monthly conversations we covered issues such as my communication styles, influencing approach, giving feedback and listening skills. Between sessions she provided telephone support. Having the

external coach reminded me of the need to keep up with the programme of coaching meetings with the three managers, and having to update an outsider on progress made between meetings was an incentive to action.

Applying the lessons

Coaching sessions with Team A's manager focused on how she could loosen the reins, allowing others to make their own mistakes and learn from them. While our styles were very different, we found the coaching relationship was actually easier and more comfortable than our line management relationship. As coach, I had to help her see how flexing her communication style could yield results with her laid-back team leader, and how easing up on the red pen mentality would help her hesitant team leader gain more confidence. We held regular monthly one-to-ones devoted to coaching. Part of the challenge was to help her become more aware of her own communication style and preferred working approach – and why this had led to frustration with her two team leaders.

I arranged monthly meetings with Team B's manager, and helped her work through some of the more difficult performance issues with her two problem team leaders. I acted as a sounding board to help her recognise the obvious improvements occurring in the performance of at least one of the two. This helped build her confidence and supported her through several performance appraisal processes that were new to her.

I met Team C's manager more regularly. We had one-to-one meetings in which we worked together to address issues in the

team. The meetings were not described as coaching sessions, and we discussed both coaching and management issues – on which I provided support, guidance and encouragement. I worked hard to soften my usual ebullient style to one he felt more comfortable with. Above all else, I made it clear that no change was not an option. He decided to swim with the tide. He attended management development courses along with the other heads of function, improving his skills and his confidence as a manager, although he'd never be a natural. He became more supportive and motivated as a result and real progress was made.

Seeing the results

After a year I believed real progress had been made, and a survey assessing the degree of team commitment and alignment with organisational goals showed we were headed in the right direction. Before my arrival the three teams were dismissed as being in an organisational backwater, but now they out-performed other teams. Although other directors were surprised by the turnaround, I knew hard evidence would be needed to convince them that coaching was the key to better performance. I therefore re-ran both 360 assessments in February 2004 to measure progress against the previous benchmarks.

The teamindex360© results showed an increase in all the key areas, with a +7.5 per cent overall improvement.

In Team A, where I had highlighted the need for the manager to show more encouragement and delegate, allowing the staff to develop, this indicator showed +17 per cent improvement.

Team B showed improvements in:

- greater clarification of roles +32%;
- improvements to working practices +20%;
- greater recognition of their contribution to the organisation +17%.

In Team C there was an overall improvement of 30 per cent, and a staggering +127 per cent improvement in the response to the statement 'The team is well led.' Other significant improvements were in:

- regular meetings to review progress +95%;
- the workload is balanced across the team +87%.

My coaching skills had improved significantly in every one of the indicators. My coach was delighted with the results, and that bolstered my confidence. The biggest improvements in performance were where my scores had been lowest in December 2002:

- Enthusiastically spends significant time coaching.
- Encourages constant learning and experimentation; tolerates well-intentioned mistakes.
- Agrees roles and learning 'contract' with the coachee.
- Jointly agrees challenging but achievable objectives for each session.
- Provides support to the coachee during their development.
- Adapts influencing style to each coachee. Is available 'at a distance' for coaching and advice – has frequent 'reviews' between sessions.

Keeping it alive

Just before the surveys were conducted, the chief executive announced a major restructuring. Two of the divisions were to be

abolished, including my division of three teams, two of those transferring to another directorate and one remaining with me for a further nine months.

The departure of a coach can have a serious effect on team performance, especially when there is no replacement. The organisation has not embraced coaching, and in a survey of management skills staff scored coaching as the lowest of 60 separate competencies. The test of coaching is whether skills transfer to the coachee – ideally coachees become self-sustaining.

Will the one-year coaching experiment be enough to ensure the three team managers carry on with it after I leave?

For Team C, the coaching experiment was only a temporary blip. They are now back in a hierarchical structure, the manager is reverting to old habits, and team meetings are a rarity. Some of the initiative and team spirit has already been dissipated. One team member has left, and others are frustrated. Without regular reinforcement from the manager, it is unlikely the team will maintain forward momentum. The director now in charge of the team is not coaching the manager, but is giving orders in a hierarchical way. Having experienced a better way, the team may be resistant and demoralised.

Team A's manager accepted an internal secondment for six months. She now trusts team leaders to manage themselves with the minimum of direction. Her red pen

mentality has been replaced by confident delegation, and a coaching relationship that helps them learn from their mistakes. Even after the transfer, she has kept in touch and carried on with the coaching relationship, which is easier now there is no line management link.

Team B's manager has gone from strength to strength. Team members have given informal, but very positive feedback about her skills development, and the performance of the two team leaders is also improving. Her ambition for management is now tempered by a realisation that it is not easy, but she has growing confidence in her ability to do it. I have every confidence she will do well in the proposed restructuring as her management reach is extended to more staff. Coaching plays an important part in her management style, and I am encouraging her to use the coachingindex360© process herself with her direct reports so she will carry on the good work.

Summary

The 360 processes proved to be a catalyst for performance improvement within the teams because the teams used the feedback from the teamindex360© to define their own solutions. Similarly, managers used the coachingindex360© to identify what support they needed from coaches in order to achieve that improvement. But for the benefits to last, coaching must be embraced by the organisation as a whole.

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