



How to Use 360 Feedback Without Getting Defensive

A Practical Guide to Receiving Multi-Rater Feedback

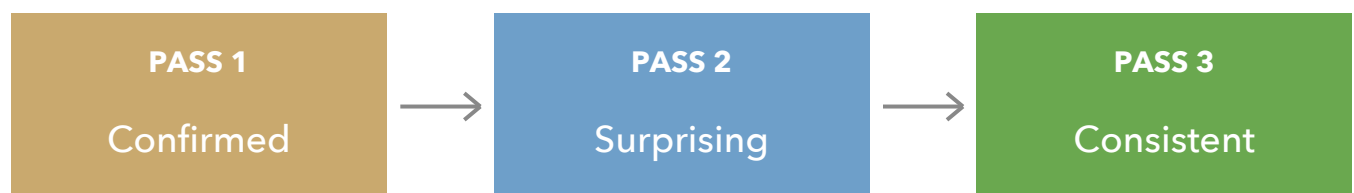
You've just received your 360 feedback report. If you're like most leaders, your first instinct is to scan for the negative comments, try to figure out who said what, and feel some combination of surprised, frustrated, and defensive. That's normal. It's also not useful. Here's how to read and use 360 feedback in a way that actually changes how you lead.

WHY 360 FEEDBACK TRIGGERS DEFENSIVENESS

360 feedback is fundamentally about the gap between how you see yourself and how others experience you. That gap exists for everyone. When the data shows that your team sees you differently than you see yourself, it's natural to question the data rather than question yourself.

Your impact is not the same as your intent. You may intend to be collaborative, but if three people rated you low on collaboration, your behavior isn't landing the way you think it is.

A BETTER FRAMEWORK: READ IT IN THREE PASSES



Pass 1: What's Confirmed?

Start with the ratings and comments that match your self-perception. These are the areas where your self-awareness is strong – you know your strengths and others see them too. This builds a foundation of confidence before you move into harder territory. Don't skip this step. Most leaders blow past their strengths to get to the problems.

Pass 2: What's Surprising?

Look for the gaps between your self-ratings and others' ratings. Pay attention to both directions. A strength you didn't know others saw is just as important as a weakness you didn't realize was visible. The biggest development insights usually come from areas where you rated yourself significantly higher or lower than your raters did.

Pass 3: What's Consistent Across Rater Groups?

If your direct reports, peers, and supervisor all say the same thing, that's not one person's opinion – that's your reputation. Conversely, if one group rates you highly and another rates you low on the same competency, that tells you something important about how you adjust (or don't) across relationships.

WHAT TO DO WITH VERBATIM COMMENTS

The open-ended comments are where most leaders get tripped up. A single negative comment can overshadow twenty positive ones. Here's a discipline that helps: read every comment once, then set the report aside for 24 hours. When you come back, read them again with this question in mind:

"If this comment were completely true, what would I do differently?"

You don't have to agree with every comment. But if you can engage with it as though it might be true, you'll find more actionable insight than if you spend your energy defending against it.

THE FIVE MOST COMMON 360 TRAPS

01 Guessing who said what.

It doesn't matter. The moment you identify a rater, you stop hearing the feedback and start evaluating the person. The data is about patterns, not individuals.

02 Dismissing low scores from people you don't respect.

If someone you manage gave you a low score, the score reflects their experience of your leadership. Even if you think they're wrong about the substance, their experience is real and it affects their performance.

03 Over-indexing on one bad comment.

Read for themes, not outliers. One person's harsh comment is one data point. Three people saying the same thing in different words is a pattern.

04 Comparing yourself to others.

Your 360 data is about your impact, not your ranking. Whether you're above or below average matters less than whether the gap between your self-perception and others' perception is large.

05 Treating it as a one-time event.

The leaders who get the most from 360 feedback are the ones who act on it and then check back 6-12 months later to see if the patterns have shifted. Development without follow-through is just awareness.

TURNING FEEDBACK INTO ACTION

Pick two things from your 360 results: one strength to leverage more deliberately and one gap to close. Not five things. Not ten. Two. Write down the specific behavior you want to change, the situations where it matters most, and how you'll know if you're making progress.

Share your development focus with your team – not the scores, but the commitment. "I heard that I could do a better job of X, and I'm working on it" is one of the most powerful things a leader can say. It models the kind of self-awareness and accountability you want from everyone around you.

About the Author: Jamie O'Brien is the founder of J. O'Brien Coaching and a certified Hogan practitioner who uses 360 feedback as a core component of every coaching engagement. With 19+ years of experience in organizational development and executive coaching, he helps leaders close the gap between intention and impact.