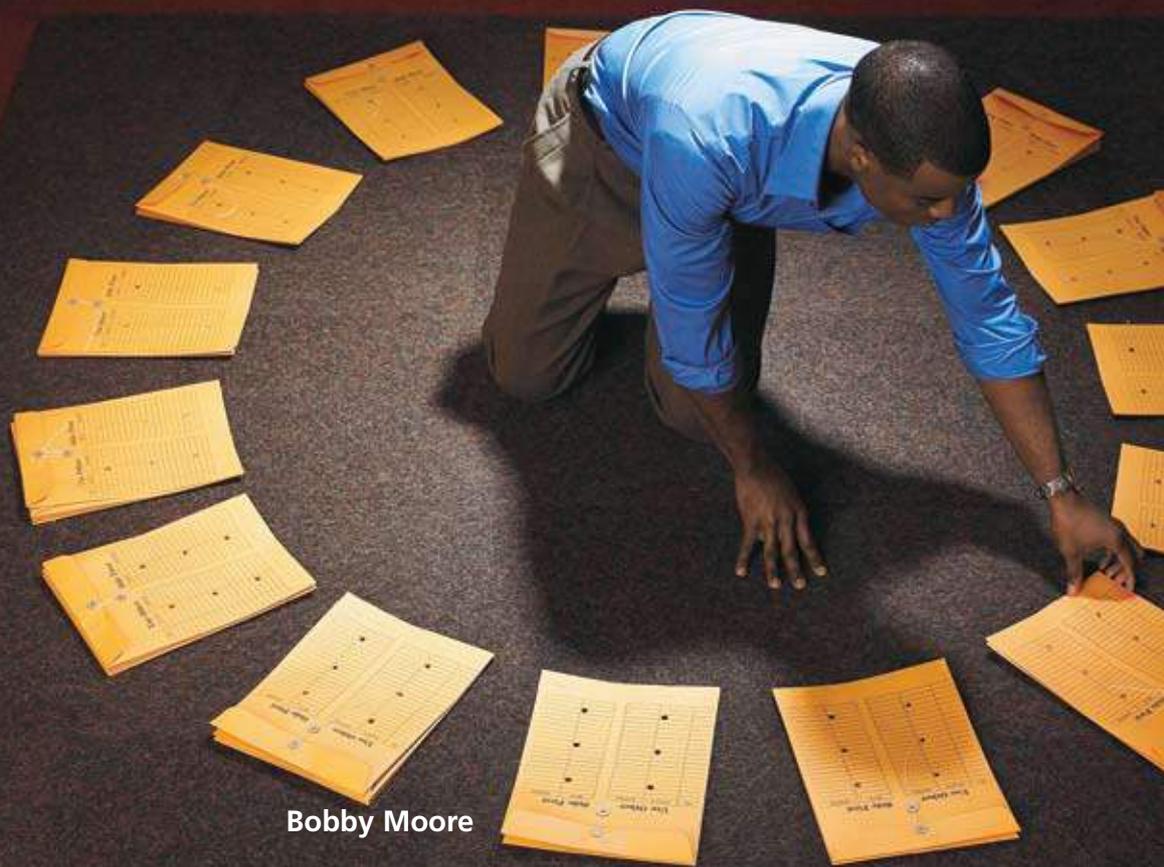# Improving the Evaluation and Feedback Process for Principals

Bobby Moore

The 360-degree feedback model, taken from the business world, gives principals a multi-lens view of their performance.

The ever-changing role of the principal has created a position of leadership so complex that traditional methods of evaluation or feedback can no longer provide enough data to develop required skills. Although today's principals are juggling more responsibilities than ever before, not much has changed in either the development or evaluation of school administrators in the past century. Also, there is little research on the direct or indirect effects that administrative evaluations may have on student learning or school culture.

The development of national and state standards for school principals has narrowed the focus to those skills and abilities required for successful and effective school leaders. However, many of the evaluation instruments or processes used to evaluate principals are poorly conceived competency models focusing on technical or task-oriented skills (e.g., visible at athletic events, completes paperwork on time). Administrators rarely receive the type of feedback necessary to improve their leadership capabilities. This is especially alarming since reform in the 21st century requires leaders to develop and hone the skills essential to transform schools into autonomous, systems-thinking organizations, revolving around professional learning communities that can embrace change and create a high-performing learning environment for students and teachers (Moore, 2007).

The purpose of this article is not to criticize the good-intentioned and child-centered educational leaders who have stepped up to lead our schools, but more importantly to question the process of providing beneficial and meaningful feedback for these leaders, so that they can reach their fullest potential through coaching and self-directed learning.

Are school principals receiving feedback or being evaluated on how effective they are in leading professional learning communities and other competencies, such as dealing with conflict? Although teacher and administrative evaluations are often not discussed in a positive context, the true purpose of an evaluation should be to help an employee identify his or her strengths that may be leveraged to increase effectiveness, as well as to provide an opportunity to identify possible areas for development and/or areas of concern.

Unfortunately, many principal evaluation processes contain only top-down appraisals from direct supervisors who usually have acquired little information or feedback from shareholders in the school's community. The job of a principal is much too complex for evaluations and feedback to be provided through a single lens. It is time for the education field to examine how business and leading companies train, develop and, more importantly, evaluate their top leaders.

360-Degree Feedback

The 360-degree feedback or multi-rater system is an assessment and evaluation instrument used by many businesses to provide feedback to managers and executives on their leadership behaviors and style from multiple individuals with whom they interact, including peers, bosses, co-workers, customers, and clients (Fletcher & Baldry, 2000). In an education model, these could be teachers, parents, fellow principals, and students.

Researchers suggest that the information provided by the multirater instrument be used only for personal and leadership development (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998; Edwards, 1996). Thus, it is important for the superintendent or supervisor to stress that this is not an evaluation tool for hiring or firing principals, but a tremendous opportunity for development.

Principals rarely receive quality feedback and information on their performance from their teachers, likely a result of teachers' fear of creating a negative work environment. However, principals can be confident that through anonymous 360-degree feedback, they can receive the honest information needed to improve their leadership.

According to Fletcher and Baldry (2000), the use of 360-degree feedback provides a variety of benefits. It creates a much more accurate picture of performance, as it offers an overall assessment of the individual, not just a manager's viewpoint. It allows teachers and staff an opportunity to provide feedback and influence the way they are managed and led, and it can create a culture where individuals become more ready to commit themselves to seeking and accepting feedback.

Edwards (1996) reported that using 360-degree feedback increases the leader's performance because it:

- Enhances information quality;
- Targets developmental areas;
- Provides strong motivation;
- Facilitates performance improvement;
- Allows measurement of training effectiveness;
- Enhances self-awareness;
- Supports continuous learning; and
- Improves the reliability and validity of performance information.

In a professional learning community, 360-degree feedback may provide the principal a tremendous opportunity to build trust and respect by allowing staff members to provide input on how they are led. Ostroff, Atwater, and Feinberg (2004) implied that while some may question the validity of 360-degree feedback, it is important for leaders to understand how they are perceived.

The relationship between how a leader sees himself or herself, and the perception of others—referred to as managerial self-awareness (MSA)—has been demonstrated through a variety of 360-degree feedback studies (Bass & Yammarino, 1991; Church, 1997; Fletcher & Baldry, 2000). Church defined MSA as how accurately a manager or leader is aware of his or her co-workers' perceptions of his or her strengths, weaknesses, skills, personality and/or abilities. Numerous leadership and management-development programs have operated on the premise that the greater the MSA, the more successful the leader will be. Organizations can measure MSA by using 360-degree instruments and comparing the leaders' self-assessments against the assessment of others (Fletcher & Bailey, 2003). If principals are to be skillful at leading professional learning communities, it is essential that they gain an understanding of how they are perceived by others in the school.

After studying effective leaders in the British navy, Young and Dulewics (2007) recommended a know-yourself model as a formula for successful leadership. An education model based on Young's recommendations would encourage principals to:

- Develop your self-awareness;
- Build your professional learning community (develop teachers' professional and organizational capacities); and
- Focus your resources on high student achievement for all students.

Careful selections of the raters in 360-degree feedbacks are crucial to the success and usefulness of the collected data (Sala & Dwight, 2002). Therefore, school leaders should be careful not to choose raters who they know will give positive and/or biased feedback. Research indicates direct-report (those who report directly to the manager being evaluated) ratings are very good predictors of performance (Beehr, Ivanitskaya, Hansen, Erofeev, & Gudanowski, 2001; Sala & Dwight, 2002).

Feedback Instruments and Processes

There are several 360-degree feedback instruments available on the market. The most important consideration in selecting an instrument is deciding how easily the information it provides can be interpreted and implemented into a leadership development plan. Another important consideration is deciding whether it measures leadership abilities. Many instruments are also available online. Reports will usually present the average of scores given by managers, direct reports, and peers in order to protect raters' anonymity. There will also typically be an overall score.

It is important to note that many leaders may go through a grieving process when reviewing their 360-degree

> **"Principals can be confident that through anonymous 360-degree feedback, they can receive the honest information needed to improve their leadership."**

feedback scores. During a qualitative case study of school administrators and coaching, it was discovered that all three of the subjects (high-performing administrators with excellent evaluations) were very disappointed and depressed when reviewing their 360-degree feedback scores for the first time (Moore, 2007). If they had been given honest feedback from previous evaluation and performance reviews, they may not have been so surprised.

When a leader receives feedback from a 360, it is important to create, with the help of a coach, a personal development plan with target goals. When examining the feedback, it may be effective to examine areas where there is a large discrepancy between perceptions of others and self-perceptions.

Reconsider Past Practices

Although research has documented the advantages of 360-degree feedback instruments, and U.S. companies have used them for years to develop and identify talent, such instruments have not been widely accepted or used by school districts, higher education, state departments of education, or educational organizations in providing training, development, or mentoring services for future and current administrators. If developing and growing school leaders are to become priorities for the 21st century, then educational organizations should reconsider past practice and integrate multirater feedback in leadership development programs and evaluation processes. **P**

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WEB RESOURCES

"360° Assessments – Where Do I Start?" is an article that offers seven tips to help create and administer successful 360-degree feedback surveys. **www.surveyconnect.com/pdf/360 Article.pdf**

In "Improving Principal Evaluation," the author discusses the key elements of effective evaluation, the standards that should be used, and the available instruments to conduct evaluations. **http://eric.uoregon.edu/publications/ digests/digest172.html**