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Corporate Self-Flagellation

Skills and Professional Development



In medieval times, religious self-flagellation was all the rage: voluntarily whipping your own back to attain a higher state of consciousness, piety, and grace.

Today, a 360-review is the corporate version of self-flagellation.

If you are one of the lucky few that has not undergone a “360,” allow me to explain the ordeal: Your coworkers, supervisors, and subordinates participate in an anonymous online survey in which they rate your strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. Free-form comments are encouraged.

In other words, those nasty remarks people say behind your back are organized, collated, and presented for your reading enjoyment. And all of this is meant to bring you to a higher state of corporate self-awareness.

The real problem with 360s is not the concept itself, but the fact that we live in a world of constant feedback demands. The 360-review is just one of multiple surveys, questionnaires, and requests for input that hit us every day.

In the past 24 hours, I received three emails from agencies asking for my opinion about external suppliers, two requests for employee feedback, and a vague survey about my “feelings” in the corporate workplace. I want to respond conscientiously, but no one should expect quality input when I am regularly harassed for my point of view.

The real problem is that few of these surveys are quick and painless. They are not like a five-star rating you give on a smartphone app. Most of these surveys are detailed, deliberative, and dull.

Faced with repetitive feedback requests, some people turn hostile. I feel sorry for the poor employee whose 360-survey arrives after a wave of bad news hits the company. Her report will only reflect the mood of the day, an open spigot of anger and frustration.

Others, however, are intentionally positive in their replies. They know that most people dwell on the negatives in anonymous reviews, so they purposefully lavish the subject with praise.

But the objective of online surveys is to foster improvement. If the results are intentionally positive or unfairly negative, no one can get better. And if we are asked for input every time we open our email, it's a challenge to consistently provide useful, constructive feedback.

I think there is a better way. While admittedly old fashioned, I think we get better feedback when we talk to others, face-to-face.

I am not suggesting that you conduct a live-action 360-review, visiting every coworker in the office to ask what they think about you. You won't get much useful information and will likely get a visit from those nice people in human resources, expressing concern about your mental health.

To really get useful feedback, you need to find what writers call a "first reader." A first reader is that one person who gives a writer an initial, unvarnished review of his first draft; someone who provides straight, objective feedback. The first reader is often a friend and advisor, but also someone who is emotionally intelligent enough to give useful advice. It is someone the writer trusts, who won't exploit his mistakes or embarrassment. And, most importantly, a first reader has an unrestricted license to tell the truth.

Every great author has a first reader. They are a necessary part of professional writing success. And just like great writers, great in-house lawyers need a first reader, too.

As in-house counsel, your colleagues and clients may not feel comfortable giving you constructive feedback. Your position as a representative of the law may lead some people to be less forthcoming, even fearful to tell you what they think. It's not that your coworkers aren't critical, they just don't share their criticism with you. Having a first reader, someone with the confidence and maturity to offer useful feedback, is most valuable when no one else is there to help.

There is a good chance you already have someone who could be your first reader, a trusted friend who has the maturity to help you see yourself. You probably just have to ask. But only invite a first reader knowing you may not like what you hear.

In the end, first readers are much more useful than a 360-review, and much less painful.

[Bill Mordan](#)



General Counsel and Company Secretary

Shire PLC