



WELL ROUNDED

Designed and handled well, executive coaching clients are finding bespoke 360 feedback exercises invaluable, says **Clive Mann**

*"O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!"*

Robert Burns (1786)

Online 360 feedback exercises have their limits, but bespoke exercises combined with coaching can lead to powerful change. Such exercises are highly valued by users of executive coaching, suggests data from the *2011 Ridler Report*.

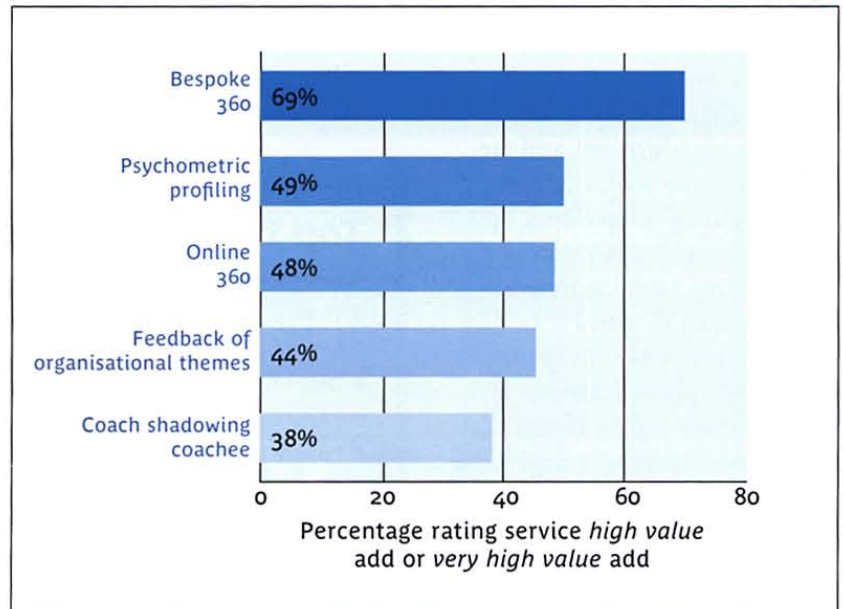
Sixty-four blue-chip companies were asked which supplementary services to senior level coaching assignments they valued most. Bespoke 360s were rated the highest value add by a significant margin, compared with other services such as psychometric profiling and feedback of organisational themes. Almost 70 per cent of respondents rated the Bespoke 360 a high or very high value add (see graph, top right).

Developmental potential

The more senior a leader is, the less likely they are to get accurate feedback from close colleagues and direct reports. Nevertheless, an understanding of their personal impact and the quality of their interpersonal relationships is central to their effectiveness.

Many companies use year-end 360 processes for performance assessment. But top executives may feel data used to appraise them is more the property of the company than their own. This may limit its developmental potential.

Online developmental 360 processes are helpful, but the amount of narrative feedback is limited typically to a line or two per question, per respondent – leaving the recipient of the 360 with a limited qualitative picture of others' perceptions.



Case study: The senior leader

Three to four sessions into my executive coaching I was intrigued about what my colleagues felt was good and bad about my leadership style. The Bespoke 360 seemed to offer a way to find out

The 360 respondents included a boss from a previous company, which helped me to understand if my impact in my current organisation was different compared to previous organisations. I also included one person I did not work with who had known me for a long time in a personal capacity. This was helpful because I could compare my non-work psyche against the work environment.

There was quite a bit in my 360 report that I had simply not heard about myself before. One of my colleagues offered me a great metaphor which really crystallised how my personality can change under pressure and it helped me to manage this aspect of my personality in a much more conscious and active way.

I don't actually know how you could have an executive coaching assignment without a Bespoke 360. If the point of coaching is to become a better leader you need to know what you need to fix, don't you? How can you do that without getting honest feedback from people who work with you?

A couple of years on, I still find it helpful to read my 360 report and reflect on the feedback, often with a smile on my face. In the end it was a valuable and strangely pleasurable experience.

I think getting the quantity and quality of 360 feedback delivered through my coach has definitely make me a better business person and a better leader. That must benefit the company in the end.

Based on an interview featured in the 2011 Ridler Report

Also, the questions tend to be standardised. They are likely to be an imprecise match to the issues faced by individuals.

A useful exercise

The Bespoke 360 is based entirely on qualitative feedback. The shortcomings of online 360 feedback are addressed, and the method can be especially useful when it is integrated in an executive coaching assignment.

Tracey Bray, talent manager, executive coaching and development at AEGON UK, says the bespoke process adds considerable value to a coaching assignment “because it targets the particular areas the client wants to know more about. This can give richer and better informed feedback than an online exercise”.

The “clear diagnosis” of this process “means the client can quickly identify issues to work on which will really help them and the organisation”, she says.

The process

As part of Ridler’s Bespoke 360 process, the coach works closely with the individual to develop and agree carefully tailored open questions. The coach puts the questions during 30 minute telephone interviews to some 12 or so interviewees, probing and clarifying the meaning of responses to eliminate ambiguity.

The feedback is written up verbatim. This is invaluable because it conveys clearly all the nuances of the feedback.

The resulting report of at least 30 pages is comprehensive, detailed, well-structured and easy to navigate. It contains a breadth and subtlety of perspectives difficult to achieve in an online 360. Robust contracting with interviewees and the recipient of



Top tips for successful Bespoke 360s

- Work closely with the sponsor client to design the questionnaire
- Ensure questions are open and likely to elicit feedback on relevant themes
- Don’t be afraid to use the phone – it’s convenient and feedback is spontaneous
- Ensure interviewees’ exact words are used in the resulting reports
- Ensure there is robust contracting between interviewees and the feedback recipient
- Mix up feedback so it can’t be traced to specific sources
- Only give the 360 report to the individual concerned
- Offer coaching as soon as the report is received
- Give the client full control over the process, eg, selection and briefing of interviewees
- Feed bespoke 360 feedback into coaching objectives
- Avoid coach interpretation of the feedback – instead, allow the client to make their own sense of it, with coaching support

the feedback is key to building confidence.

The feedback is mixed up so that it cannot be traced to specific interviewees and it is only given to the individual.

“There’s no man so friendless but what he can find a friend sincere enough to tell him disagreeable truths”

Edward George Bulwer-Lytton

Adding value for leaders

Effective senior leaders appreciate the value of understanding what their work colleagues really think of them. They often disclose more on the phone than they would be willing to write on a 360 form.

Individuals invest a considerable amount of time commissioning and designing their Bespoke 360s. It gives them a high level of ownership of the process and

output. This increases their motivation to put into action ways of addressing feedback.

Coaching support is key to helping senior leaders make sense of the 360 report as soon as they receive it. A coaching session scheduled just after the individual has read their report provides a safe environment. This helps to ensure negative feedback is put into context and that positive feedback is acknowledged.

Key issues arising from the feedback are integrated into the individual’s coaching objectives. The process of receiving insightful feedback can spark the beginnings of some very powerful change. ■

● **Clive Mann** is managing director of Ridler & Co and editor of the Ridler Report. For a copy of the report email laura.taylor@ridlerandco.com www.ridlerandco.com