

360-Degree Feedback: Can We Handle the Truth?

Captain Mike Lambert, U.S. Navy (Retired)

Early in October 2004, *Navy Newsstand* announced that the surface community had launched the 360-Degree Feedback Program. The program includes self ratings, peer reviews, and leadership assessments. Feedback is sought from everyone in the chain of command. Designed to “show ourselves as others see us,” it

face warfare community. He was one of the 260 participants, “from seaman to admiral” in the leadership summit. The pilot program for 360-Degree Feedback was one of more than 30 pilot programs proposed during the summit.

Submarine Squadron 20 commanding officers undertook a second, less-publi-

Feedback, particularly negative feedback (even when given constructively), can be difficult to handle—for both provider and receiver. It is harder still, if the person providing the feedback is a junior in the chain of command. Keep in mind that negative feedback provided to seniors may be given at considerable risk to your

own future success. At least that was my experience. Let me share one of my lessons learned with you.

A master chief with whom I worked very closely suggested (while he was in the terminal stages of cancer) that I provide our commanding officer with some much-needed (in our opinion) feedback. I did exactly what the master chief suggested. Now, I am only guessing that our commanding officer did not care for the feedback because he has not spoken to me since. That feedback, which I have summarized here, earned me immediate “persona non grata” status at the command and with our commanding officer. In all fairness to him, I probably earned it. The cardinal rule of providing feedback is to use tact and balance. I failed

in that regard; I should have been more tactful.

What I Told My CO

Summary of my constructive feedback to my commanding officer:

- You’re going to be a leader in the community; these things may help you.
- You are a great speaker. Be careful not to lose the feeling behind the words. Words have meaning; actions have consequences. Ensure your actions match your words. Some sailors actually listen to every word. They can sense any hint of insincerity.

• Your command philosophy should be written down and distributed widely in the command. This is a huge reason for the CNO’s success in the Navy. We all know



Vice Admiral Timothy LaFleur; here as commander, Naval Surface Force Pacific, being interviewed by Journalist 2nd Class Christian Marquardt, has advocated the 360-Degree Feedback program as “an excellent performance feedback tool.”

may improve communication across the chain of command. The approach helps by bringing out every aspect of enlisted and officer performance.

That month, selected officers from the surface warfare community started participating in a new multi-rater feedback pilot program in an effort to enhance individual leadership, career, and professional development under the Navy’s Human Capital Strategy. Many will immediately recognize the program as something then-Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Vern Clark introduced during “The Leadership Summit” at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, five years ago (3-6 December 2001).

Vice Admiral Timothy LaFleur was a natural to test the concept with the sur-

cized test of the program in May 2005. While the results of that test have not been made public, Captain Steve Struble, squadron commodore, described the program as “an investment in the future of the Navy,” adding: “The windfall is that participants will certainly benefit on a personal level. These tools help develop the ‘right brain’ aspects of awareness, judgment and creativity, rather than the ‘left brain’ functions of technical knowledge and procedural compliance that we so often focus on as submariners.”

What’s Holding Up 360-Degree Feedback?

But where has the program been since then? What’s holding it up? The fact is, 360-degree feedback is troublesome.

where he's going and we talk about it. The same should have been true at the command level. The command wants to follow you. Tell us where you want to go.

- Respect our time. Typically ten or more people are always awaiting your late arrival at some function (staff meeting, wardroom meetings, dinners, graduations, etc). If people believe that you are willing to consistently waste their time, they will stop feeling guilty about wasting yours.

- Be consistent with your administration of military justice. It's easy to punish junior members in the command for trivial violations. Applying the same standards across the board does not always work. In fact, the more senior the individual is, the more accountable they should be held for their action or inaction. Everyone is watching—and judging.

- When senior officers visit the command, maximize their exposure to the junior members of the command. They will benefit the most.

- Take your junior officers, chiefs, and sailors to lunch or simply go have lunch with them in their mess. Everyone will learn a lot, especially you.

- Invite your key command leaders to your home for a social event so they can

see how it's done. Juniors need to see how their seniors do this. It's part of the learning/teaching process.

- Share information with your department heads. It is astounding how much information a commanding officer is exposed to and that is not shared with the department heads. Distributed information is enormously powerful. Your department heads can keep a secret if there is a requirement for secrecy. Trust them.

- Don't play favorites with members of the wardroom. It hurts the wardroom and it hurts you.

- Focus your calendar on the command's mission. Ceremonial events and public relations are important, but your time should be spent on those areas the commanding officer can directly influence for the greatest benefit to the command's mission.

- Don't take this feedback the wrong way. You are an officer of incredible potential. Promotion boards will see it the same way.

What Vice Admiral LeFleur Thinks

As Vice Admiral LaFleur said, "The 360-Degree Feedback program is an excellent performance feedback tool and designed for counseling purposes only.

Feedback results will not be entered into fitness reports or be available for use by selection boards. Instead, the goal of the new system is to promote a culture of high performance and continuous improvement, with leadership at the foundation."

Based on my limited experience in providing feedback to my senior, I wonder if our leaders are as ready to receive 360-Degree Feedback as we are to provide it. I do agree 100 percent with Vice Admiral LaFleur and share the belief that I have personally benefited from receiving feedback on how others see me. Constructive feedback from seniors, peers, and subordinates will make us all better—if we can take it. Stand by, seniors in the chain of command. Sometimes feedback is awfully hard to swallow, especially when administered by your junior.

We'll see where the pilot program takes us and whether it goes Fleet-wide in the next few years. Ready or not, here it comes.

Captain Lambert retired in June 2006. He was most recently the staff director on the Office of the Secretary of Defense's Detainee Task Force. He commanded Naval Security Group Activity Yokosuka, Japan, and was also the director of training at the Center for Cryptology at Corry Station, Pensacola, Florida. His career spanned 30 years of service, from seaman recruit to captain.