360-degree Feedback is a popular fad. It relies on instruments designed to capture information from a variety of sources in the hope that the feedback from these sources can be best applied by the individual. While the idea of collecting information from a variety of relevant sources is commendable, the overall simplicity of the information collection process limits the usefulness of the information.

The authors take issue with these kinds of instruments and point out why the “feedback” from 360-degree feedback instruments is severely limited by many factors which include: (1) the reliance on generalized traits; (2) a limited or nonexistent frame of reference for making rater/observer judgments; (3) a memory-based, often incomplete description of past performance; (4) the inability of the observer to interpret behaviors; and (5) the reliance on the instrument designer’s scoring system, factor analysis, or data collection methods to interpret the information for the participant.

The authors have developed instruments which differentiate between Other People’s Observations (OPOs) and Other People’s Expectations (OPEs). OPOs are based on context-free assumptions. In contrast, OPEs are situation-specific and provide both the rater and the recipient with an accurate frame of reference through which to better understand the implications of the expectations held.

The article describes how the instruments were designed to capture critical leadership expectations and how this information can be applied. © 1993 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

**PERSPECTIVE: DOES “360-DEGREE FEEDBACK” RESULT IN GOING AROUND IN CIRCLES?**

The term “360-degree Feedback” is misleading. It suggests a newly discovered concept. It suggests a new order of precision. In reality, “360-degree Feedback” is not new at all. Perceptions of people have been available as long as there have been other people to observe them. However, not all of these perceptions are insightful, free of bias, or even accurate. Many things go unnoticed because the observer may not know what to look for. On the other hand, many things are observed but may get misinterpreted. As a consequence, perceptions get distorted.

“360-degree Feedback” implies that feedback to the individual is a goal. Thus to be useful, feedback requires the observer to have a frame of reference and to share this frame of reference with the person being
observed. As we will see, most 360-degree feedback instruments are trait-based, rather than reference-based, and do not provide a situationally based context. Feedback is therefore limited to providing a summary of how the individual is perceived in relation to generalized trait-based outcomes, rather than the concrete situations. The rater is either left to his or her devices to understand these generalized outcomes or is provided "guided learning" through the eyes of a third-party observer—one who did not complete the instrument on the individual.

360-degree Feedback also implies a dimensionality to the data, suggesting that feedback from peers, subordinates, customers, and/or bosses is somehow enriched by including multiple sources of input. In effect, however, the information is not multidimensional at all, since frequently it is based on a situationally independent frame of reference that often changes with the perceptions of the rater.

The proliferation of these new kinds of feedback instruments (Van Velsor & Leslie, 1991a, 1991b) has taken place without consideration of how the judgments or observations collected in these instruments are actually made and what they mean. To better understand what observers completing these forms are asked to do, it is necessary to differentiate between the observations per se, vis-à-vis the expectations made by the people who serve as observers, raters, or judges of others.

OPOs (Other People’s Observations) are the most common form of ratings and have become the "lingua franca" of supervisory appraisals and 360-degree feedback instruments, as well as of the ratings used in performance appraisal systems. OPOs are observation-based judgments, which on the surface appear to be factual and accurate. While it is assumed that the rater has an accurate frame of reference to make a judgment, these observations may actually be context-free (Hollenbeck, 1992). For example, a typical item might ask the rater to evaluate a behavior such as "Takes the time to think, plan, consider, reflect" and has a response set such as:

- No opportunity to observe
- Almost never
- Not often
- Some of the time
- Often
- Almost always

The observer is left free to establish the context for the frequency rating. Such an item has the advantage of ease of use. Without a situational context, however, it is impossible to know whether "almost always" is good or bad, or whether inconsistencies among raters are due to raters, the ratee, the contexts, or some interaction among all of these.

In addition, OPOs are often trait-based judgments. The accuracy of such judgments, coupled with the lack of contextual specificity, creates many errors. This is particularly apparent when OPOs serve as the basis for 360-degree feedback.
Since they lack contextual specificity, OPOs are often incomplete descriptions of past performance. These observations are incomplete because the observer does not know what to look for and consequently cannot assess the impact or relevance of the behavior being described. As importantly, OPOs do not allow raters to accurately interpret their observations. This is left to the instrument designer, through the use of implicit or explicit groupings of observations as factor scores or as a trait composite.

There is nothing wrong with this kind of observation-based approach. OPO instruments attempt to get the observer to make the best observation possible. What is misleading is the focus on collecting these observations without asking the observer to examine the relevance of the interpretation of these observations. Consequently the person receiving these ratings is left with a third-party view (expressed as factor scores, trait groupings, or some “norm-based” comparisons) of the importance of these judgments.

OPO instruments remove the observer’s interpretation and substitute for them the interpretation of the instrument designer. OPO instruments, no matter how well designed, are flawed, particularly when feedback is the primary intent of the instrument. Observers need help in amplifying their observations by providing a meaningful context. To do so, we have developed the notion of the OPE. An OPE (Other People’s Expectations) is a social judgment or inference—an expectation of how a person will behave in a given situation. It allows the observer to make contextual observations. It provides direct feedback to the individual concerning how he or she is seen by others in specific situations. It then allows the individual to generalize from these situations to others.

THE CONCEPT OF OTHER PEOPLE’S EXPECTATIONS:
THE OPE

What are OPEs?

Judgments about performance, potential, and career mobility are driven by the expectations of others. These expectations are based on perceptions held by others concerning how an individual will behave or act in a specified situation.

Expectations reflect how people think about others. For example, imagine a person entering a room after a meeting has been started. Will the people in the room collectively groan because they see this person as a difficult person with whom to work, or are they eager for this person to join the conversation because they see this individual as a very creative problem solver who adds great value to meetings? These perceptions often lead to specific expectations about this person’s judgment,
his or her use of facts, and the accuracy of the information he or she will provide to the group. Given such expectations, this individual may have to work twice as hard to convince others or may be able to sell ideas without a second effort. Expectations often become unconscious self-fulfilling prophecies.

Many people, unaware of others’ expectations of them, are not able to take constructive actions to change negative perceptions or amplify positive expectations.

In many cases, the behaviors behind others’ perceptions are never clearly delineated. The perceptions are formed as a result of cumulative observations and inferences about an individual. Sometimes these inferences are based on concrete behavioral data. More often they are the collective hypothesis which forms the aura behind a person’s reputation or style. A reputation can be based on a single incident, recounted as a war story and transmitted to others. Or, it can be based on cumulative experiences with this individual in a number of different settings. In either case, expectations often are treated as reality. Because these expectations often are powerful examples, they can be used to generalize to other situations and therefore exert a strong influence in determining the future assignments and opportunities for executives (Sorcher, 1985).

For example, a recently hired Vice President and General Manager of a Fortune 100 company remarked, “How did I do?” at the close of an interview with the firm’s Senior Vice President of Personnel. This comment, seen by the interviewer as inappropriate in this company’s culture, did not keep the executive from being hired because he had extensive industry-wide experience. However, the incident was relayed to the firm’s President, who noted, “He doesn’t seem to be the self-starter I thought he might be.” It turned out that this incident and the attendant expectations about his performance (unknown to the newly hired Vice President) were openly discussed through the executive office grapevine. This executive had a great deal of difficulty gaining peer attention to his ideas and eventually left the company, even though his “How did I do?” question was really a cynical piece of feedback to a supercilious interviewer.

Incidents such as these frame perceptions. Repeated often enough, they begin to take on a life of their own. Unless challenged, they stand uncorrected as part of the perceptual baggage, both good and bad, which forms the reputation of an individual.

Since expectations are powerful determinants influencing the organizational decisions made about executives, we decided to develop a mechanism for systematically capturing and using these expectations. The unit of analysis selected was an OPE, or “Other People’s Expectation.”

An OPE (Other People’s Expectation) is the aggregated accumulation of series of opinions which are held by others concerning a future performance outcome.

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The definition of the OPE has specific connotations in how we set out to assess this concept.

Aggregated accumulation refers to the fact that judgments often have a directionality to them rather than specific precision. We have found that summarizing and averaging judgments, as practiced by most 360-degree feedback instruments, is not very helpful in assessing OPEs. The averaging process, while producing a score, does not treat extreme ratings effectively. Often it is the extreme score which helps to direct insights about directionality.

Series of opinions stresses that OPEs are likelihood estimates concerning how a person might act in a specified situation. These likelihood estimates are captured by examining frequency distributions which note others' opinions in a series of leadership situations faced by most contemporary managers and executives.

Future performance outcome emphasizes that OPEs are not simply descriptions of past performance. Rather, they are concepts others hold concerning how a person is likely to act in the future. These opinions are obtained and stated as expectations concerning how an individual will be anticipated to behave in a specific situation.

The three components which result in OPEs (the aggregated accumulation of information; the series of opinions which result in likelihood estimates, and the emphasis on future performance) allow OPEs to be used to both predict future performance and to provide systematic feedback to individuals.

Why OPEs?

Other People's Expectations are extremely important because, to a great extent, executives base their decisions on what they expect others to do. In many cases these expectations form the basis of truth as seen by others. They take on particular significance when formal assessments about a person are lacking or incomplete or when the key decision maker is removed from direct or frequent contact with the individual. Expectations also are very prominent when there is little real performance data, or no history or track record about an individual—either because the person is new to the organization or because people have been realigned as a function of mergers, reorganizations, or new ventures.

For example, whether an individual is invited to participate in a project often depends on what others expect of this individual. Is he or she seen as a collaborative individual? A contributor of new ideas? A person with lots of resources and contacts? A person who has experienced this situation before? And so forth. The list of determinants of these expectations can be endless.
How OPEs Are Assessed

The perceptions, opinions, and expectations held by others can take many forms. For example, OPEs of a person's trustworthiness, integrity, problem solving capabilities, or approach to solving conflict, all tap different performance domains. While the OPE is the basic unit of analysis for capturing performance expectations, to be most useful we needed to frame those OPEs of particular interest. To accomplish this, we used three mechanisms. First, a situational framework was developed. Next, to assist the rater, we provided thematic stimuli which enabled the rater to picture the individual in the situation. Finally, we generated behavioral expectation statements to reflect performance in each situation. A brief review of these three aspects of the OPE framework follows.

1. **Situational Framework**: Rather than asking a series of questions about behavior in general, or behaviors related to specific traits, we created a contextual focus for assessing OPEs. By obtaining the OPEs for specific situations found in contemporary examples of business start-ups, business expansions, or business turnarounds, we provided a structured situational framework to capture the judgments. The situations were developed based on an analysis of the kinds of activities typically faced by general managers and executives at different times in their careers (Sorcher, 1985). The situations also reflected our experience in assessing candidates for general manager populations (Moses, 1985).

2. **Thematic Stimuli**: A drawing of a person in each situation was created, following the approach used by Murray (1943) in his Thematic Apperception Test and adapted in other projective instruments. The drawings are designed to have two consequences: First, they enable the rater to project the individual into a specific situation. Second, the drawings designate a specific task which needs to be done. Both of these elements help specify the situation for the rater.

3. **Behavioral Expectation Statements**: A series of questions, framed as behavioral expectations, was created for each situation. Each question relates to the task identified for the specific situation. The statements were developed from the framework of behavioral modeling (Goldstein and Sorcher, 1974), group evaluation (Sorcher, 1985), and executive-level assessment centers (Moses, 1985). The behavioral expectation statements further specify the performance expectations for each OPE for the individual.

The assessment of OPEs is conducted by a specially developed instrument, Insight-Out (Sorcher, Moses, & Hollenbeck, 1989), designed to measure OPEs. The three aspects of the OPE framework (situations, thematic stimuli, and behavioral statements), along with a description of the instrument itself will be reviewed in a later section.

**THE EXPECTATIONS PROCESS**

How are expectations formed? We regard OPEs as social judgments or inferences—expectations of how a person will behave in a given
The expectations process is one of social perception, concept formation, and social inference. At the heart of the expectations process, however, is the frame of reference for the observer—the situation itself. Smith and Kendall (1963) explored the use of Behavioral Expectations Scales, but their purpose was to minimize rater errors rather than to provide for or maximize feedback. Their innovative approach, which spawned considerable research, used behavioral expectations as a method to overcome error by focusing on the observer as an observer rather than as an integrator, assessor, or problem solver. Using expectations as the basis for feedback, requires a different emphasis: how the observer forms an expectation. The expectation itself is derived from the concept of the person held by the person making the judgment.

OPEs are memory-based rather than trait-based judgments about an individual (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). This, as we have noted, is a major distinction between a situation-based instrument such as Insight-Out and most trait-based instruments. OPEs are inferences based on the concept we have formed of the individual from past experience, and as such they are memory-based rather than trait-based.

Trait-based judgments are easy to make. Because the labeling process is made so easily, the judgments are formed quickly and once presented in a heuristic, tend to be more final (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Trait-based judgments are often integrated into the observer’s implicit personality theory (Borman, 1983) and are often affected by the connectedness with one’s other biases.

Bandura (1986) identified a generic problem solving process which includes these steps: identifying the problem, searching for relevant data, then selecting an alternative. In this context, the situations presented and the behavioral items are very important in helping the observer identify the type of inference needed. Bandura also distinguishes between memory tasks and gathering new data tasks.

The situational framework for OPEs requires the observer to search his/her memory for examples that fit the type of problem identified (e.g., making a decision with limited information). The behavioral statements encourage the observer to find examples stored by the person in terms of episode or events rather than by a generalized trait.

Fiske and Taylor (1991) describe situation heuristics which allow the observer to construct hypothetical scenarios to try to estimate how something will come out. OPEs allow the observer to place the individual in a situation, search his/her memory, and, based on what is known about the person, then select likelihood estimates about specific response patterns. This process is quite different from classifying a behavior into an existing implicit trait-based label.

For example, suppose that the observer is asked to reflect about a person’s capacity to speak up during meetings. Trait-based judgments require the observer to make ratings into predetermined categories without providing a context for these judgments: dominance, persuasive-
ness, or even presentation skills. Trait-based judgments are easy to make because people tend to store the judgment (dominance) rather than the behaviors on which the judgment is made. The underlying behavior (speaking up during meetings) supporting the trait-based judgment is often quickly forgotten, and when asked to judge, “Is the person dominant?” observers can make the classification without searching for behaviors.

Behavior search judgments require the observer to process the information more deeply (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). The observer is asked to search for examples that fit the problem. The observer forms expectations for the example given (in the context of speaking up in meetings) and based on the memory search then selects a behavioral response. OPEs cause the process to focus on behaviors, rather than traits; while trait judgment processes cause the process to focus on traits with the behaviors supporting the traits quickly forgotten.

Despite the proliferation of instruments requiring trait-based judgments, their usefulness when providing feedback to executive level populations is questionable. The common wisdom, supported in a recent summary by Hellervik, Hazucha, and Schneider (in press) suggests that behavioral feedback is more useful than trait feedback since behavior can be changed. One essential feature of feedback is motivation; our experience is that OPEs not only draw attention to what others think of us, but also highlight the implications of these expectations for organizational decisions.

OPEs are social inferences or judgments that result from an observer’s use of a general problem solving model to form expectations of how others would act in specific situations. Thinking of OPEs in this way has encouraged us to draw upon social cognitive theory to examine how perceptions are formed, stored, and retrieved and how the heuristic process is used in forming the expectations.

HOW INSIGHT-OUT WAS DEVELOPED

Content Areas: The Leadership Situations

In recent years, there has been considerable interest in better understanding the role of leader-manager (particularly at the level of the general manager) and the expectations associated with that role (Kotter, 1982; Brady & Helmich, 1984; Sorcher, 1985; Bennis, 1989; Kraut et al., 1989; Kotter, 1990). What is emerging is a set of expectations associated with behavior at more senior management positions.

In designing Insight-Out, we decided to draw upon our experiences with executives rather than rely on a traditional item analysis develop-
ment process. We drew upon experiences in managing and delivering high-quality executive development programs (Hollenbeck, 1991), developing and conducting succession planning approaches for this target level (Sorcher, 1985), and assessing senior management potential (Moses, 1985). These were used to help frame the situations faced by many contemporary managers. Our extensive consulting experience with many Fortune 100 clients, which has involved job analysis of contemporary senior management jobs in a wide variety of organizations also served as a foundation for our efforts.

Insight-Out was designed to capture behaviors common to a general manager population. Over 25 specific situations faced by contemporary general managers were identified based on research and practice. Most of these were situation-specific or related to a particular aspect of an organization’s life cycle. For example, some situations dealt with acquiring a new unit, starting up a new business, downsizing an organization, or dealing with multinational issues. Other situations reflected marketplace conditions such as competition, deregulation, or emerging technology. While each of these presents specific leadership challenges, the frequency of occurrence of these situations will vary depending on the specific issues facing the business. The 25 situations were reviewed with colleagues and executives over a period of six months, and a list of 8 key content areas common to most general managers emerged. The eight key leadership content areas were the following:

- articulating vision and values
- demonstrating integrity
- building and managing teams
- communicating expectations
- adapting to new situations
- resolving complex problems
- encouraging innovation
- managing conflict

**Framing the Expectations**

Once the content areas for eliciting expectations about performance were established, the next task was to create a contextual framework to obtain likelihood estimates concerning others’ expectations. This was accomplished in three distinct ways. First, for each content area, a series of situations was created and reviewed, and the situation that best represented a typical event was selected. For example, for the content area, “Demonstrating Integrity”, a situation was selected in which the individual and a peer have to decide mutually to significantly reduce their respective organizations, yet both want to protect their own people as much as possible. The situation is presented in the following way:
In this situation, the executive you are describing is talking with a peer. Both have to take mandated downsizing cuts which significantly affect their operations. Both want to protect their own groups from deep cuts.

In addition to presenting concrete situations, a second key feature was used to frame the expectations. A specially drawn illustration was developed which serves as a projective stimulus and enables the respondent to place the executive in the situation itself. Several versions of these stimuli were developed and tested. Each illustration is designed to be ambiguous, yet to represent contemporary business scenes. For example, the illustration used to frame expectations concerning “Demonstrating Integrity” shows two executives, seated together at a conference table, in deep discussion with each other. Each situation has its own illustration designed to frame the experience for the rater.

The situation description and the accompanying illustration served as situational frames to elicit expectations. In many respects, these two features are similar to the videotape modeling used with behavior modeling (Goldstein & Sorcher, 1974) which enables individuals to actively visualize the situation and to set the stage for assessing expectations.

Finally, to frame the expectations, a specially designed rating scale was developed. Since we were interested in likelihood estimates, a 5-point scale was developed which asked: “Do you expect the person you are describing will . . .,” with the following scale points:

- Almost certainly will not
- Probably will not
- May or may not
- Probably will
- Almost certainly will

The use of future oriented expectations coupled with concrete situations and illustrations all set the stage for eliciting specific behavioral expectations.

The Behavioral Stems

Eight to ten behavioral statements were developed for each situation. For example, statements included in obtaining OPEs concerning “Demonstrating Integrity” included responses to the question “Do you expect that the person you are describing will”:

- Be candid and say what he or she thinks?
- Be completely honest when presenting information and arguments?
- Avoid taking advantage of a difficult situation for personal gain to the detriment of the organization or others?

A total of 100 unique behavioral expectations were developed, and, after pilot testing, 70 were selected for inclusion in the instrument.
Observer Instructions

The final element in constructing the instrument concerned the expectations placed on the rater. Both the instructions and a manual describing the instrument's development, purpose, rationale, and scoring are included with each instrument. The intent was to provide the observer with sufficient information to be an informed observer in order to both understand and appreciate why he or she was being asked to respond to a specific situation or behavioral item. Since the scoring system was designed to be direct and transparent, the observer does not have to guess which trait is being measured by an item. There is no hidden, secret scoring system to surprise the observer or participant. Finally, since each behavioral statement has specific contextual meaning, observer interest is maintained. Rather than providing an exhaustive (and often exhausting) list of statements, adjectives, or the like, to which the observer needs to respond, the behavioral statements are concrete, situation-bound, and call for specific, not inferred judgments.

APPLYING OPES

OPEs have two basic uses: (1) as a basis for systematically collecting inferences so that they can be used by others as a basis for prediction; (2) as a means of collecting inferences that will let the individuals know how they are viewed by others in their work environment.

When used as a basis for prediction, such as in Succession Planning or in the Group Evaluation Technique (Sorcher, 1985) the appropriate population to complete the OPE instrument is composed of those individuals who will be involved in determining future assignment planning for the individual. In this context, collective expectations can be both clearly defined using a common language rather than vaguely articulated opinions, and when fed back to the individual, can provide a candid basis for discussing developmental actions.

Decisions about others, particularly decisions about career moves and subsequent job assignments, depend heavily on the cumulative observations of other people. Expectations as to how someone will perform in a position of more responsibility are based on these perceptions. These OPEs are, thus, central to career-related recommendations. OPEs enable one to tap into the observers' opinions and help both the observers and other decision makers to better understand the basis for these opinions. And, if later used as a means of feedback, the OPEs allow the individual to better understand, and if appropriate, better manage the opinions held by others.

When used primarily for feedback to the individual, two types of OPE populations can be used. When the individual is participating in a struc-
tured event such as a developmental assessment center or in an organizational simulation designed for development, peers participating in the event can provide many insights about OPEs. When used in Individual Assessment activities, particularly with individuals who are seen as potential candidates for derailment (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988), the OPEs are obtained from individuals who the participant has identified as people whose opinion s/he respects. These can, of course, include traditional sources of 360-degree feedback (bosses, subordinates, etc.), or they might include individuals with whom the individual has had specific conflict, or with whom it is particularly difficult to deal, or other defined OPE populations which will be particularly useful for developmental feedback.

CONCLUSIONS

360-degree Feedback is a popular fad. It relies on instruments designed to capture information from a variety of sources in the hope that the feedback from these sources can be best applied by the individual. While we applaud the idea of collecting information from a variety of relevant sources, the overall simplicity of the information collection process limits the usefulness of the information.

We take issue with these kinds of instruments, and in this article have pointed out why the “feedback” from 360-degree feedback instruments is severely limited. The accuracy of the feedback information is limited by many factors, including: (1) the reliance on generalized traits; (2) a limited or nonexistent frame of reference for making rater/observer judgments; (3) a memory-based, often incomplete description of past performance; (4) the inability of the observer to interpret behaviors; and (5) the reliance on the instrument designer’s scoring system, factor analysis, or data collection methods to interpret the information for the participant.

To better understand these distinctions, we differentiate between Other People’s Observations and Other People’s Expectations. The former are context-free, generalized assumptions, and even when presented as behavioral statements, are summed and treated as trait-based assumptions. The focus, then, is on the trait, rather than the underlying behavior. In contrast, OPEs are situation-specific and allow both the rater and the recipient a common frame of reference to better understand the implications of the expectations held. How we went about designing an instrument to capture critical leadership expectations and how this information can be applied are described.

One intriguing aspect of OPEs is the notion that most people are unaware of OPEs of them. If they were more aware, they could take more constructive action to change, and in the process improve their career futures. While many 360-degree feedback instruments provide
the potential for some form of feedback, only OPE feedback provides the individual with an opportunity to manage the expectations of others. Since the expectations are clearly delineated and are tabulated in terms of frequencies rather than averaged scores, the OPEs provide many opportunities to understand and reflect upon the expectations held by others. The feedback can occur either through developmental discussions following assignment and succession planning activities or as a result of assessment or developmental simulations. In either case the individual is given behavioral insights, not only into the kinds of situations that can maximize his or her performance or can be problematic, but also into the behavioral basis upon which OPEs are formed. Using these insights for developmental planning and for approaches to better manage the expectations of others are powerful leverage points for personal development.

We have raised a number of issues for 360-degree feedback instruments. We encourage those using a feedback instrument to avail themselves of the thinking-through process which results in subsequent expectations to better understand whether the cognitive and response process used fits their required purpose. It is clear that most managers and executives want feedback. The rapid growth, acceptance, and proliferations of 360-degree feedback instruments support this need. However, the quality and the usefulness of the feedback will improve with increased attention to situation specificity. Focusing on situations and their attendant OPEs allows the individual to better understand what aspects of his or her performance enhance or impede effectiveness.

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