

Developing Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Management Skills Through the 360 Assessment

THOMAS E. CONINE JR.
AND BARRY LESKIN

A reliable tool for providing constructive feedback, the 360 assessment is widely used across multiple disciplines, countries, cultures, and industries. Although the basics of the 360 assessment process remain unchanged, its purpose and interpretations are evolving with the times. The ongoing focus on the importance of emotional intelligence and conflict management skills in business has shed light on the value of the 360 in appraising an individual's abilities in those areas. Identifying strengths and opportunities for improvement through input from a variety of stakeholders can spur career development and, when combined with post-evaluation simulation exercises, be particularly effective in honing crucial skill sets among both seasoned professionals and new entrants to the workforce. © 2016 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

A Chinese proverb advises, “If you want one year of prosperity, grow grain. If you want ten years of prosperity, grow trees. If you want one hundred years of prosperity, grow people.” To that end, organizations routinely utilize feedback processes geared to illuminate employee strengths and areas in need of development. The most valuable feedback is constructive and unbiased and offers the recipient the opportunity to develop skills and/or adjust behavior that will forward his or her career. Intended to foster professional growth at the individual level, the feedback ultimately helps ensure long-term organizational prosperity. The most common form of feedback comes from everyday face-to-face exchanges with peers and supervisors.

When given in a helpful spirit, this real-time feedback is extremely valuable for it occurs during normal conversation and addresses an issue or topic in the moment. Formal performance reviews, such as 360 assessments, are more structured vehicles for feedback. More than 90 percent of the Fortune 500 firms have used 360 assessments, primarily for leadership development, with occasional use for performance appraisal.

Being systematic methods of collecting opinions, these assessments provide aggregate snapshots about an individual's performance, often from a wide range of coworkers. Given the ongoing trend to foster emotional intelligence (EI) and assist with conflict management in the workplace, organizations have increasingly supplemented face-to-face feedback with more formal assessment tools, particularly the 360 assessment. Indeed, the 360 assessment is considered so useful that some researchers suggest that it should be introduced to university students before they enter the workforce or early in the onboarding process.

Although 360 assessments have been conducted for decades within corporate environments and by dozens of consulting businesses that specialize in the field, these analyses typically generate little data that corporate human resource (HR) executives, academics, and practitioners outside the firm can use for reference and comparison as each organization's data are considered proprietary. In addition, given

the variance in organizational cultures, it is often difficult to compare the results of a 360 assessment from one organization to another. These results, however, can be compared in the aggregate by consultants with client approval and shared in certain circumstances, keeping confidential any feedback from individual participants. Those administering 360 assessments within a single corporation, either internal HR staff or external consultants, come away with both aggregate and individual statistical information and, in many cases, a wealth of anecdotal material about the overall organizational culture, which can pinpoint trends that warrant attention. This insight can provide a broader context that adds perspective to the data when an assessment administrator presents it to members of senior management and the HR department for a given client.

Putting the 360 into Practice

Designed to develop leadership at every level—but particularly in identifying and grooming general manager candidates—360 assessments work best in

organizations where the culture supports and values formalized skill development. In the work that we have done using 360s within corporations, we have often used the results of these assessments to create a real-life business simulation, a safe environment where individuals can work within teams to develop skills that have been identified as lacking or in need of improvement. Working with other stakeholders in the organization, often on real issues, and using techniques such as role-playing can shorten the distance between compilation of 360 assessment results and performance development.

The TRI-Leskin 360 assessment shown in **Exhibit 1** can be used to capture an overall view of business acumen and people/leadership skills. The corporate audience for which this 360 assessment is typically administered comprises current or prospective general managers responsible for profits and losses (P&L) within their organization. To be most effective, a general manager has to be well versed in all dimensions of business acumen, including EI and conflict management. It is not uncommon for general managers to have

Exhibit 1. TRI-Leskin Business Leadership Assessment

Exceptional - shows outstanding expertise for this item and is a role model for others. Proficient - capable, fully performing in demonstrating skill and knowledge. Limited - demonstrates some knowledge and skill, but limited demonstration of expertise. Not Observed - no demonstration of skill or knowledge (though action should be part of individual's role) Not Applicable - not part of job function.						
Name		Rater's Name				
Business leader has demonstrated experience in:		Please enter an "X" in one box after each item				
		Not Applicable	Not Observed	Limited	Proficient	Exceptional
1	Demonstrates a deep understanding of the external landscape affecting the organization: Economic, Technological, Competitive and Political forces					
2	Identifies the critical few key objectives, maintains focus despite multiple demands on his/her time; willing to say "no" to requests from others					
3	Deeply understands how this business works, e.g. how we make money					
4	Understands market opportunities, competitive threats, strengths and weaknesses of own and competitors organization					
5	Has a strong understanding of key financial drivers such as profitable growth, net income and cash generation and their relationship to each other					
6	Builds relationships with external stakeholders, e.g. suppliers, industry groups, strategic partners, distribution channels, etc.					
7	Uses conflict management skills to reconcile differences among stakeholders while maintaining the relationships					
8	Demonstrates consistently strong persuasion and influence skills with peers and others					
9	Demonstrates candor and openness when discussing organizational issues, even with sensitive subjects					
10	Consistently accepts responsibility for success or failure – provides no excuses					
11	Accurately assesses self, understanding ones own strengths and limitations and accepts feedback non-defensively					
12	Has a reputation for demonstrating courage and taking some risks (doesn't always "play it safe")					

cross-functional and cross-boundary responsibilities, as well as P&L accountability. Prospective general managers who participate in a 360 assessment can identify critical skill or stakeholder interaction gaps that need to be addressed to ensure their effectiveness on the job.

Prospective general managers who participate in a 360 assessment can identify critical skill or stakeholder interaction gaps that need to be addressed to ensure their effectiveness on the job.

Organizations that place an individual without adequate business acumen and leadership skills in a general manager role run significant risks. Research suggests that replacing a global general manager can cost as much as \$5 million, plus the cost of errors based on mistakes made by the one being replaced, as well as severance, recruitment, selection, salary, and other expenses. The purpose of a 360 assessment at the general manager level is to:

- provide the prospective or existing general manager anonymous feedback from key stakeholders—managers, direct reports, peers, and customers—against a set of organization-related criteria;
- enhance the working or proficiency knowledge of current general managers;
- properly prepare participating prospective general manager candidates by identifying skill and knowledge gaps;
- promote the marketability of those who may move within or across industries by making them aware that business acumen and leadership skills, particularly EI and conflict management, are invariant across industries;
- help corporations avoid the potential significant opportunity cost of employees promoted to jobs for which they are not adequately prepared;
- provide an opportunity for the 360 assessment recipient to share and discuss results,

implications, and prospective next steps with an immediate manager or coach.

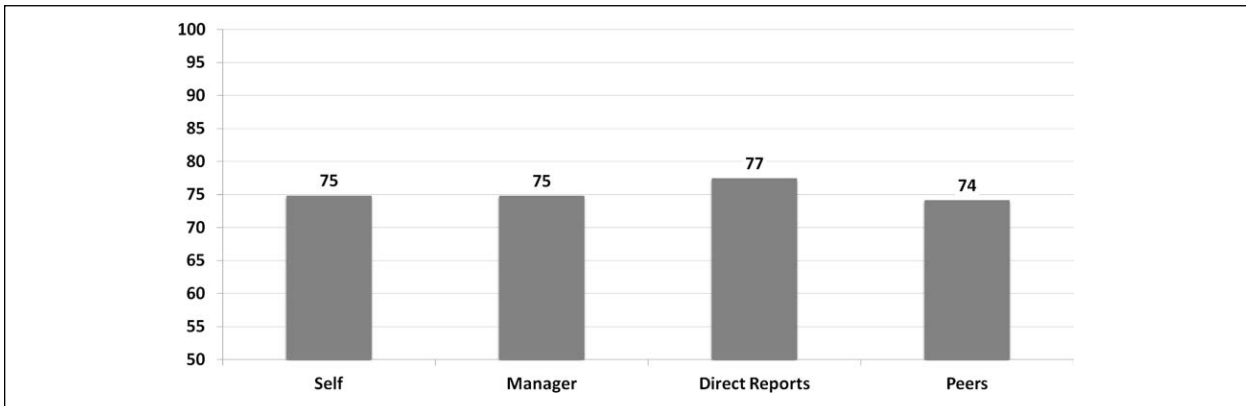
The TRI-Leskin 360 assessment is based on 36 behavioral skills that have been refined into 12 elements that reflect business acumen and leadership skills that have been demonstrated to be relevant to current and/or prospective general managers. The first six statements in the instrument reflect business acumen in both the macro and micro environments. The remaining six statements are geared toward leadership or people skills that address EI.

The list of assessment statements is brief, in line with basic Pareto analysis which tells us that, typically, most variation will be described by fewer, rather than more, items. Fewer questions lead to brevity, increasing the likelihood of accurate completion by raters. Time-strapped business leaders also will appreciate the fact that the assessment is quick and easy to complete, encouraging thoughtful feedback that will be of greatest value to the recipient.

Since 360 assessments include information from a variety of sources, such as a person's subordinates, colleagues, supervisors, and customers, as well as self-evaluation, there is always the possibility that office politics can result in either over- or underrating a candidate. Should the recipient of the feedback feel insecure about the process, the feedback he or she receives may result in a defensive, subjective, or biased response. Yet the 360-degree nature of the assessment builds in checks and balances that often highlight a biased response on the part of an assessor or the individual being assessed.

In an analysis of the potential measurement pitfalls in a 360 assessment, Buckingham (2011) stressed the importance of ensuring that raters constitute "a perfectly representative sample of the competencies you are trying to measure." He concludes that having individuals rate themselves is of particular value. Comparing and contrasting self-ratings with those given by superiors, direct reports, and others

Exhibit 2. Summary Averages Across Respondees



yields a robust analysis in which consistencies can readily be acknowledged as strengths or addressed as development goals. As shown in **Exhibit 2**, the individual in question self-assesses at exactly the same level as his or her manager, whereas his or her direct reports provide higher ratings and peers come in a bit lower in the aggregate score based on the 12 assessment items given in Exhibit 1.

A representative summary of assessment responses gathered for more than a decade across a variety of industries is presented in aggregate form in **Exhibit 3** (page 22). This graph mirrors the format of the individual assessment graph shown in Exhibit 2, but instead of representing one individual's 360 assessment results, it plots examples from five industries: insurance, telecommunications, technology, banking, and health care. The first bar for each industry represents the individual's self-assessment, and the following three bars indicate answers provided by managers, direct reports, and peers, respectively. In the insurance and health care industries, individuals tend to rate themselves lower than do their manager; in telecommunications and banking, the opposite is true. Technology employees and their managers had identical ratings.

Across the board, direct reports tend to rate higher than do peers. This may indicate that direct reports

are more comfortable complimenting rather than criticizing their superiors in a formal assessment tool. As for peer ratings, competition may affect the assessments of one another. **Exhibit 4** (page 22) shows the multi-industry results in a different way: according to the 12 assessment statements. To the best of our knowledge, the information presented here marks the first time that data from a common 360 assessment across a wide variety of industries have been documented and compared.

Using the 360 as a Tool to Foster Growth in EI and Conflict Management Skills

Assessment criteria vary by industry and organization. The areas that are most commonly addressed include skill set; understanding of job requirements, what makes the organization successful, market conditions, and competitors; and other performance factors. The individual's demeanor in the workplace—individually and when interacting with others—reflects the emotional side of performance. Yet this crucial aspect of workplace behavior received scant attention until the mid-1990s, when it became conceptualized as EI.

Assessing EI

Among the skill sets that can be honed through use of the 360 are the building blocks of EI, a concept

Exhibit 3. Average Values by Industry Respondees

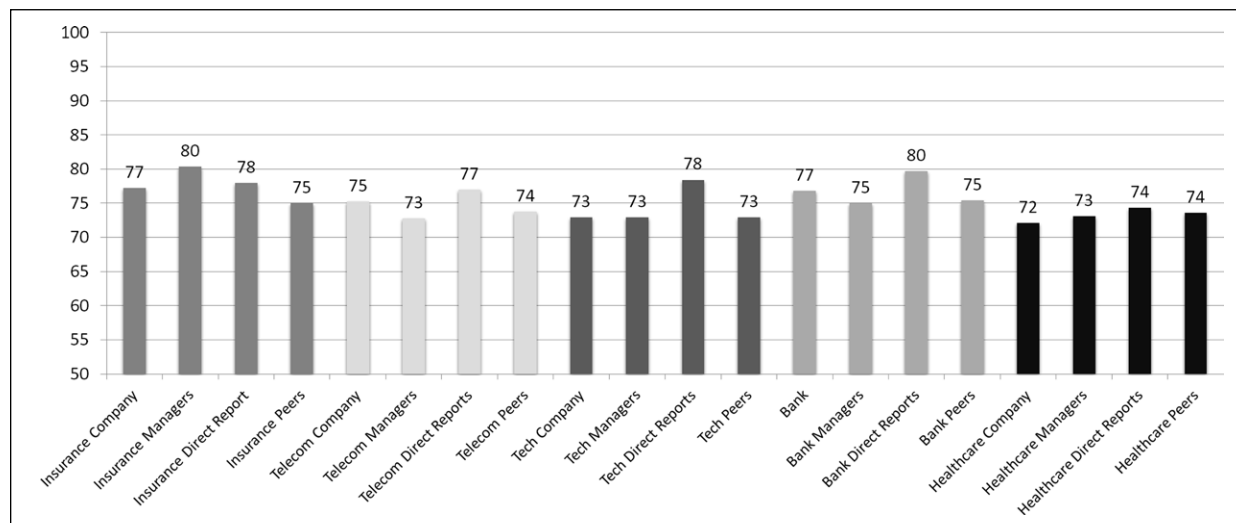
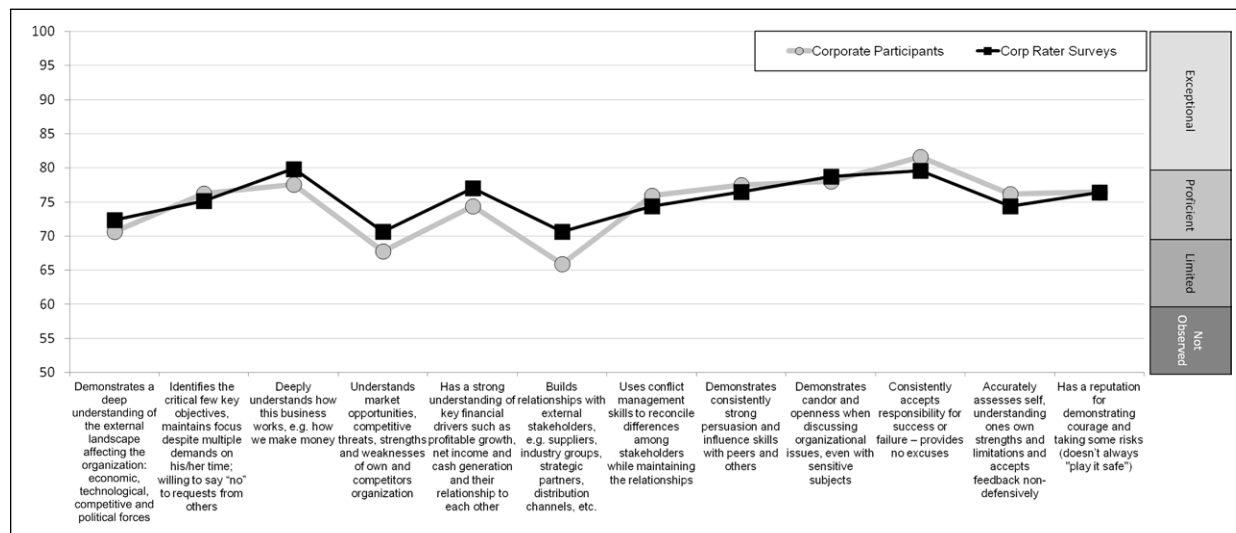


Exhibit 4. Average Values of Corporate Participants and Raters



that became a key component in corporate education following the publication of Daniel Goleman's 1995 best-seller, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*.

An erstwhile *New York Times* science reporter, Goleman delved into the topic in the early 1990s

after reading an article in a scientific journal on the way the brain regulates emotions. In a blog on his website, Goleman later wrote, "a far-flung network of researchers has been at work, ensuring that the application of EI will be grounded in solid data. The Rutgers University-based Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations (CREIO)

has led the way in catalyzing this scientific work, collaborating with organizations that range from the Office of Personnel Management in the federal government to American Express.” He further noted that “today, companies worldwide routinely look through the lens of EI in hiring, promoting, and developing their employees. Johnson and Johnson (another CREIO member) found that in divisions around the world, those identified at mid-career as having high leadership potential were far stronger in EI competencies than were their less-promising peers. CREIO continues to foster such research, which can offer evidence-based guidelines for organizations seeking to enhance their ability to achieve their business goals or fulfill a mission.”

Experience has shown that the best use of the 360 today in fostering EI is to raise participants’ self-awareness, reinforce performance measurement criteria, and encourage specific goal-setting for continuous, directed growth. The 360 assessment can identify an individual’s specific development needs and then, often with coaching, serve as a tool for mapping out a plan for strengthening areas of weakness. For example, general manager candidates with low scores on cross-boundary interactions can form a plan over time to build relationships with stakeholders beyond the candidates’ departments or divisions.

A multistakeholder 360 assessment that includes manager(s), direct reports, peers, and customers allows the recipient to see which behaviors stand out for different stakeholders, and how perceptions of performance can vary between those with close versus limited interaction with the participant. Worthy of note, the 360 assessment feedback often shows lower scores for cross-functional focus—interaction with peers and customers, for instance, which is often less frequent than interaction with managers and direct reports. Those low scores often reflect the low priority and limited reward given to collaboration with peers and managers, even though senior leaders may say that

collaborating with peers and managers is important. In effect, senior leaders often do not “walk the talk” about collaboration. They say that working together is vital, yet typically reward behavior at the individual and department levels, not across functions or boundaries. As previously noted, the TRI-Leskin Business Leadership Assessment tool includes six statements geared toward leadership and people skills that address EI.

Assessing Conflict Management Skills

Administration of the TRI-Leskin Business Leadership Assessment tool over the course of ten years at about 20 firms has shown that individuals consistently score lowest on conflict management skills and that employees at the general manager level report spending 15 to 25 percent of their time on conflict issues. In the TRI-Leskin assessment model, point seven addresses this area: “Uses conflict management skills to reconcile differences among stakeholders while maintaining the relationships.”

Conflict management draws on individuals’ interpersonal skills, their experience in handling conflict in a variety of settings—at home, with friends, and on the job—and the influence of their early supervisory role models, both good and bad. From a psychological perspective, it may not be easy to erase traumatic childhood memories, where fear of conflict originates for some people, but through a structured 360-based protocol, those being assessed can learn how to avoid involuntary, knee-jerk reactions to handling conflict when a particular memory is activated. In these instances, the 360 assessment can identify areas of need and suggest development strategies to address them. This is especially valuable in a global working environment where cultural, religious, and psychological factors may conflict with a particular organization’s corporate culture. Those whose scores reflect a conflict-averse personality can learn to sense impending conflict early on and address it openly by using one of the five options in the Thomas-Kilmann model of conflict resolution (1974):

- *Compete*: This entails defending one's position, standing up for one's perceived rights, or simply trying to win. The stance is assertive and uncooperative.
- *Accommodate*: The opposite of competing, with this approach, the individual gives in to the other, willingly or unwillingly.
- *Avoid*: This means ignoring, postponing, stepping aside from, or withdrawing from the situation.
- *Compromise*: A combination of the first two options, this involves both assertion and cooperation and, therefore, is a combination of the first two styles. Each party gives and takes, arriving at an agreeable, or at least palatable, solution.
- *Collaborate*: The opposite of avoiding, this approach assumes that both parties can work together to resolve the conflict. It entails creativity, listening, and trust.

Using 360s to Develop a New Generation of Leaders

Although 360 assessments have been used for decades within corporate environments, there has been rather limited application of these tools within a university setting, particularly during a business simulation. Ingols and Shapiro (2014) provide an excellent summary of 360 utilization in academic business classes, and Özgen, Alabart, and Medir (2013) address an application in senior engineering programs. In a comprehensive discussion of the relevance of self- and 360 assessments and their link to the skills needed in organizational environments, Taylor (2014) declares the need for management education to become more relevant to management and leadership practices. He also advises educators to put theoretical classroom learning to use by giving students real-world applications to learn from while still in school. While drawing on corporate examples, Sigler and Rhee (2014) make a compelling case for the use of 360-style feedback for measuring student performance instead of traditional testing and final exams.

University leaders need to ensure that their students realize the multifaceted nature of today's workplace, that they may hold numerous jobs in possibly varied locales, and that being proficient in a team environment, both on-site and virtually, is essential to success. Students also need to be aware of the fact that ultimately they are responsible for their own careers and that proper personal development is essential to be competitive in a fast-paced business environment.

University leaders need to ensure that their students realize the multifaceted nature of today's workplace, that they may hold numerous jobs in possibly varied locales, and that being proficient in a team environment, both on-site and virtually, is essential to success.

Conducting 360 assessments at the college level can:

- help students identify their development needs and seek validation of these needs from their teammates in an experiential team-based business simulation;
- enable a direct comparison of student and teammate data with corporate data across varied industries using the same 360 assessment, and this makes it possible for students to see the types of skill sets and competencies that they will need in order to be prepared to assume a position in the corporate world;
- facilitate the sharing of an instrument that others in the academic world may want to use in their classes, such as a team-based experiential business simulation.

Tiwari, Nafees, and Krishnan (2014) found that team dynamics emerged as the most critical dimension of overall learning in academic business simulations. A business simulation based on 360 assessment results can, to a certain degree, emulate

a real-world environment to help students identify areas of strengths and weaknesses and act as a vehicle to enhance strengths and correct weaknesses. Overall, the experience can help accelerate students' development prior to full-time employment, while data from teammates will round out their perspectives of their strengths and weaknesses.

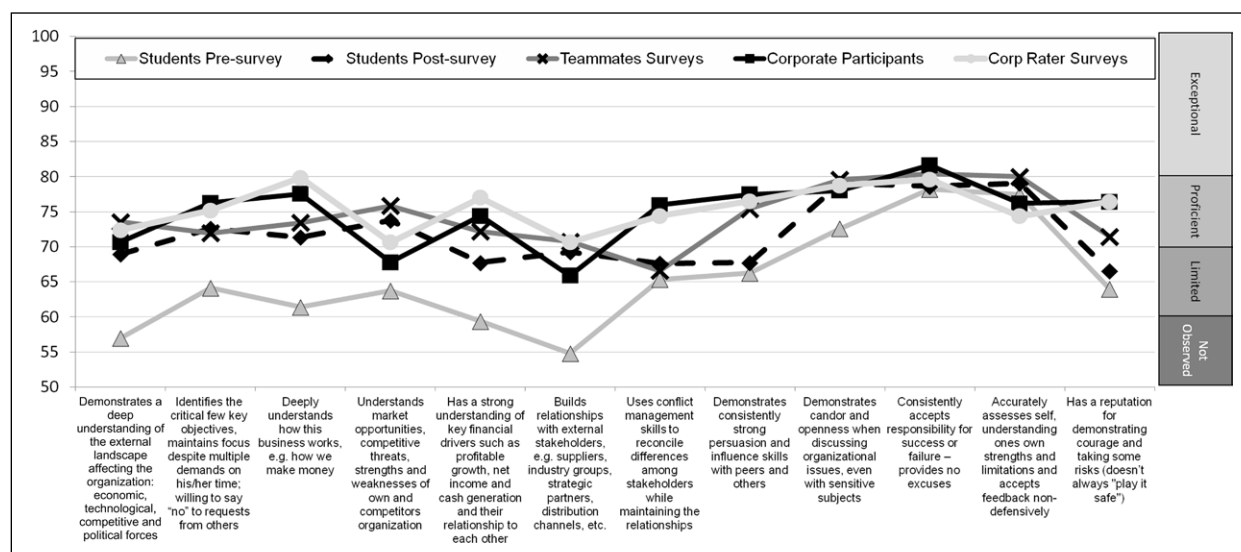
A comparison of student and corporate 360 results shows that when students can experience a business simulation flanked by before-and-after 360 assessments, many show marked progress in development of skills and acumen and a shortening of the learning curve (see Exhibit 5). Given that the questions rely on past experience, it is not surprising that students score lower than other experienced participants, but it is impressive to see significant improvement over what they learned from the simulation experience.

Recent college graduates who work for businesses that use the 360 assessment tool may get an early start on their career development. According to Alicia Davis, director of global finance learning and development at Dell, "The Tri-Leskin assessment

that we continue to utilize in our Global Finance Excellence Program for our new executives focuses on a few key leadership areas and leadership characteristics for each participant. The participant receives live feedback from teammates in a group setting at the end of the simulation. This enables the new executives to quickly consider their leadership perception and ability to influence others, and, of course, perhaps some areas of opportunity to increase their overall leadership ability. The feedback from teammates, at a minimum, shows where potential development gaps exist and allows for peer feedback in a collaborative sitting to be incorporated into manager coaching sessions and executive development plans."

Given the ongoing need to strengthen EI and conflict management skills in the workplace, it makes business sense to address these issues at the university and recent graduate level. Individuals' personal style is usually set by the time they reach their early 20s, so students' scores on assessments based on real-world criteria may reflect their potential for effectiveness as future leaders. Used properly, 360 assessments can enhance the competency of not

Exhibit 5. University Versus Corporate Comparison



only seasoned professionals but also of students and new hires, especially those who aspire to quickly assume management and executive positions.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank TRI Corporation Associate Lane Burkes for all quantitative results, as well as Steve Mercer, Rich Avrut, Geraldine Mattia, Carla Haas, and their graduate students and corporate clients for their assistance.

References

- Buckingham, M. (2011). The fatal flaw with 360 surveys. HBR Blog Network. <https://hbr.org/2011/10/the-fatal-flaw-with-360-survey>, Oct. 7.
- Goleman, D. (1995). Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ. New York: Bantam Dell. <http://www.danielgoleman.info/topics/emotional-intelligence/>
- Ingols, C., & Shapiro, M. (2014). Concrete steps for assessing the “soft skills” in an MBA program. *Journal of Management Education*, June, 412–435.
- Özgen, S., Alabart, J., & Medir, M. (2013). Implementation of a 360-degree feedback assessment process for the development of the leadership competence of senior engineering students. *Leadership and Management in Engineering*, April, 65–75.
- Sigler, T., & Rhee, K. (2014). Unlocking learning: Discovering the keys to effective assessment. *Journal of Management Education*, June, 303–312.
- Taylor, S. (2014). Student self-assessment and multisource feedback assessment: Exploring benefits, limitations, and remedies. *Journal of Management Education*, June, 359–383.
- Thomas, K., & Kilmann, R. (1974). Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument. Mountain View, CA: CPP, Inc.

Tiwari, S., Nafees, L., & Krishnan, O. (2014). Simulation as a pedagogical tool: Measurement of impact on perceived effective learning. *The International Journal of Management Education*, November, 260–270.

Additional Resources

- Azevedo, A., Apfelthaler, G., & Hurst, D. (2012). Competency development in business graduates: An industry-driven approach for examining the alignments of undergraduate business education with industry requirements. *The International Journal of Management Education*, April, 12–28.
- Jackson, D., & Chapman, E. (2012). Empirically derived competency profiles for Australian business graduates and their implications for industry and business schools. *The International Journal of Management Education*, July, 112–128.

Thomas E. Conine, Jr., PhD, is a professor of finance at Fairfield University in Connecticut and president of TRI Corporation, which specializes in corporate education, experiential leadership, and simulation programs to help clients develop leaders, sharpen financial acuity, improve business acumen, and enhance shareholder value. His clients have included 14 of the Dow 30. Dr. Conine has also been an adjunct faculty member at GE Crotonville, General Electric's corporate education center, since the early 1980s. He can be reached at tomc@tri-simulation.com.

Barry Leskin is president of Talent Management Consulting, which focuses on assessment and development of corporate employees, in particular, at the general manager level. Previously, he served as chief learning officer of Chevron/Texaco and Ernst & Young, department chair of organization and management at the University of Southern California, and executive director of the university's Executive MBA and HR professional track. His corporate clients have included Agilent, IBM, Hewlett Packard, BP, and GE, where he was actively involved in the early days of WorkOut at Crotonville. He can be reached at barryleskin@gmail.com.

Copyright of Global Business & Organizational Excellence is the property of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.