

Axis of Leadership: A 360 Degree Assessment

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It can be helpful for leaders to analyze their behaviors on a regular basis in order to determine areas of strengths and weaknesses. Self-assessment instruments can include, but are not limited to, Bolman and Deal's Leadership Orientations Self-Assessment [LOSA] (Bolman & Deal, 2017), the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument [TKI] (Thomas & Kilmann, 2007), and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator [MBTI] (Myers & Briggs Foundation, 2003). However, these tools cannot provide a fully comprehensive evaluation of a leader's overall performance because consideration is not given to the opinions of individuals that work with the leader. In order to obtain a broader view of a leader's ability, feedback from a cross-section of different individuals at the leader's organization can prove to be very helpful. I recently completed the Leadership Skill Assessment [LSA]: 360 Degree Feedback (Virginia Commonwealth University Department of Educational Leadership [VCU EDL], 2019) along with six individuals: my direct supervisor, two direct reports, and three colleagues that do not report to me but work with me at the University of Mary Washington (UMW). The purpose of this paper is to report the data and explain the similarities and differences between my responses and the responses of the collaborators. Based on this analysis, I will discuss in specific detail my current leadership skills and deficiencies.

### **Analysis**

The LSA (VCU EDL, 2019) is comprised of thirty questions distributed among four sections: Organizational Ability, Oral and Written Communication, Teamwork, and Judgment. Respondents are instructed to answer each of the questions by choosing a rate of effectiveness on a scale of 1 (Ineffective) through 5 (Outstandingly Effective). These questions are paired with a follow-up question asking respondents to document the source(s) of evidence used to rate

performance. Each section contains 7-8 questions related to several different aspects of the particular factor of leadership.

### **Organizational Ability**

In terms of Organizational Ability, respondents are surveyed on a leader's ability to develop action plans, use available resources, prepare for meetings, establish timelines, delegate responsibilities to others, and monitor progress.

### **Oral and Written Communication**

Within the Oral and Written Communication section, respondents answer questions pertaining to a leader's ability to speak articulately using proper grammar and pronunciation, write clearly and concisely using proper mechanics, clearly present ideas in different settings (one on one, small group, formal presentations, etc.), and determine how to tailor messages to meet the needs of unique audiences.

### **Teamwork**

Within the Teamwork section, the leadership skills assessed include the ability to perform organizational tasks, contribute ideas, maintain focus to achieve team goals, and seek input and consensus from team members. Additionally, respondents are asked to judge how effectively the leader supports and encourages the ideas of others.

### **Judgment**

The Judgment section assesses the leader's ability to identify causes of problems and take appropriate action, analyze information to determine the important elements of a situation, seek additional information, ask follow-up questions for clarity, and use information sources that are relevant to issues. This section also assesses how the leader recognizes relationships among issues and communicates a clear rationale for decisions.

**Responses**

Each of the six collaborators anonymously completed all thirty questions of the LSA (VCU EDL, 2019); for the purpose of this paper, their responses will be taken as a whole.

Overall, the means of my responses were consistently lower than the means of the collaborators' responses. See Figure 1.

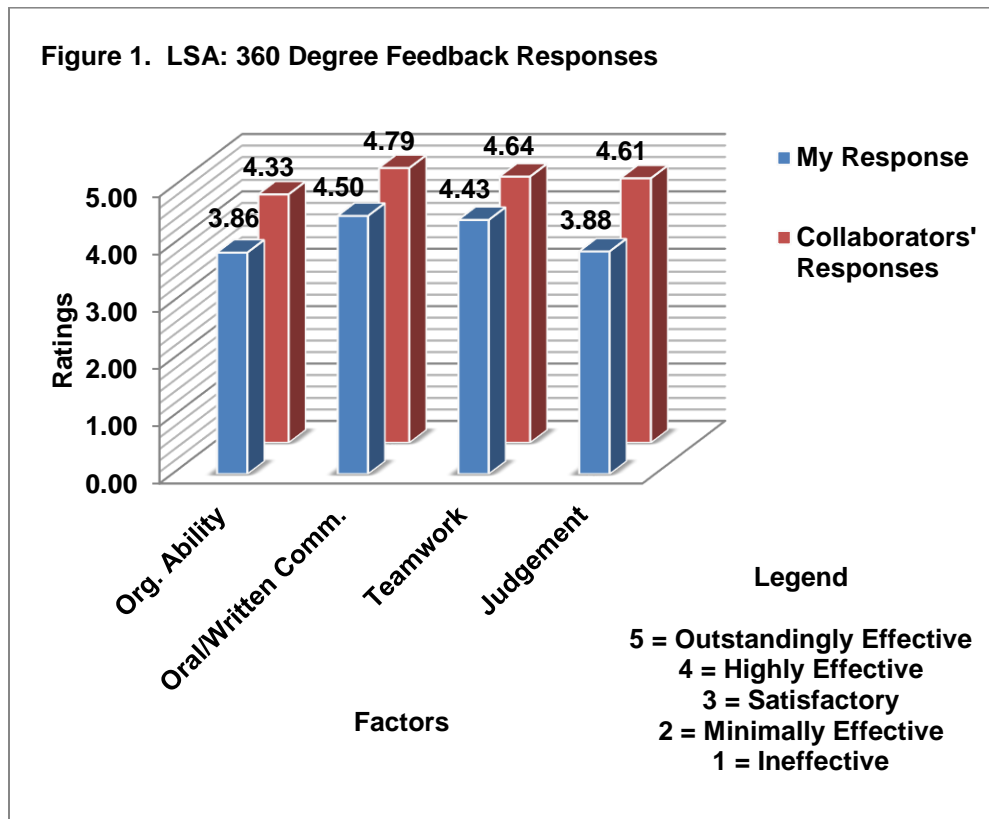


Figure 1. Means of my responses compared to the means of the collaborators' responses for the LSA.

Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of the sources of evidence that respondents selected for each factor; multiple answers could be selected for each question. Since *personal observations* accounted for 30 of the 33 total sources of evidence that I selected when

completing the assessment, I did not include these numbers in Table 1 so that the data would be more reflective of the collaborators’ evidence for their answers. Even without including my own sources of evidence, *personal observations* accounted for the main source of evidence for most answers at a rate of more than double the next highest source (*reports from others*).

Table 1

*LSA (VCU EDL, 2019) Sources of Evidence Frequency Distribution*

Factors	Personal Observations	Reports from others	Documents	Other Sources	No Evidence	Total
Organizational Ability (7 Questions)	35	16	13	4	5	73
Oral and Written Communication (8 Questions)	45	18	26	1	1	91
Teamwork (7 Questions)	34	19	9	7	1	70
Judgment (8 Questions)	47	24	17	7	0	95
Total	161	77	65	19	7	329

As shown in Table 1, there is overwhelming support that respondents are very familiar with my leadership behaviors, whether it is from their personal observations or through discussions with others at UMW that work with me. Additionally, *documents* was often selected as a source of evidence, illustrating that respondents also considered tangible items such as written communication, agendas, presentations, etc. when answering questions. Moreover, *no evidence* was only reported .02 percent among all responses. Therefore, the data likely offers a

very valid account of my leadership abilities according to individuals that I report to, work with, and supervise.

### **Discussion**

Since the results of the LSA (VCU EDL, 2019) include responses from a varied selection of colleagues, they can be used to examine not only how I view my abilities in the four factors of the assessment but also how others view my abilities in these areas. While there are similarities in our scores, there are certain significant differences as well.

#### **Organizational Ability**

There was a -.094% difference between the means of my responses in the Organizational Ability factor compared to the means of my collaborators' responses (Figure 1). Since organizational skills such as preparing for meetings and monitoring progress are aspects of leadership that do not always take place in the presence of others; this might explain why this particular factor had the highest percentage (7%) of responses of *no evidence*.

While I am pleased that others rated me higher than I rated myself in this area, the fact that this performance factor was rated lowest among the four by both myself and the collaborators (3.86 and 4.33 respectively) indicates that it is an area of my leadership that I need to improve upon. Reviewing my responses to each specific question for this factor reveals that I rated myself Satisfactory two out of seven times, the highest percentage of Satisfactory responses I listed for myself out of all four factors of the LSA (VCU EDL, 2019). It was also the only factor that contained a question ("Monitors delegated responsibilities") where the mean response of the collaborators was below a 4.00 (Highly Effective).

Due to the fact that I only have two direct reports, I do not engage in aspects of leadership such as delegation and monitoring progress as often as I might if I supervised a larger

team. I am cognizant of this and often question whether I would be capable of overseeing a larger staff. The responses of the collaborators appear to indicate that it is not the area of leadership they believe to be my strongest, and my own responses in this category appear to confirm this belief.

### **Oral and Written Communication**

Whereas the collaborators and I indicated the Organizational Ability factor to be the weakest area of my leadership style, we rated the Oral and Written Communication factor to be the strongest. Fittingly for this category, *personal observations* and *documents* were the sources of evidence cited the most by collaborators.

One of the reasons I believe I am successful in utilizing effective communication skills is because I keep the tone of the message in mind when writing and speaking with different individuals. Sometimes how you deliver the message is as important as the message itself (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p. 4). Moreover, it is very important to me to recognize how to tailor messages to different audiences, as one of the questions of the assessment addresses and in which my collaborators and I rated my performance to be Highly Effective.

Having earned a master's degree in English, I take a great amount of pride in maintaining a high level of written communication skills. Considering how deeply I value communication in the workplace, I am very proud that this is the factor in which I was rated highest by those I work with. I have often witnessed how weak oral and written communication skills of otherwise capable and effective leaders can have a negative effect on how they are viewed by others. I have also found that the absence of strong communication skills can lead to an absence of clarity, something that is essential in the workplace since individuals need to clearly understand the goals, objectives, and directives that a leader sets forth. Hence, the value of effective

communication skills cannot be taken for granted and I am very pleased to see my collaborators rate this factor so highly.

### **Teamwork**

In my opinion, teamwork is the logical extension of the Oral and Written Communication factor; it would likely be difficult to be a productive and participatory team member if communication skills are not strong. Therefore, I understand why the means of my responses aligned very closely with the means of the collaborators' responses for this factor (4.43 vs. 4.64). Contributing as a productive member of a team is something I have been committed to throughout my career.

After recently completing LOSA (Bolman & Deal, 2017), I rated myself highest on the human resource frame because of how much I value developing strong relationships with colleagues. Thus, it did not come as much of a surprise that I also rated myself highly in the Teamwork category of the LSA (VCU EDL, 2019). I believe others at my organization feel similarly about me as I have earned two service awards at UMW: The Staff Advisory Council's Larry Atkins Award for "lending a helping hand to teammates" and "going above and beyond in every task while wearing a smile on their face" (University of Mary Washington, 2019a) and the Richard V. and Rosemary A. Hurley Presidential Commendation which pays tribute to a former President of UMW by recognizing and rewarding "outstanding service of University employees" (University of Mary Washington, 2019b).

Notably, *no evidence* was only selected once among the 70 sources of evidence reported. The results of this performance factor validate my longstanding commitment to supporting and encouraging others through teamwork.

### **Judgment**

The largest disparity between my responses and the responses of the collaborators was for the Judgment factor, where I rated my overall performance as 3.88 compared to the 4.61 rating of my collaborators for a difference of -.146 percent. Similarly to how I view my performance in the Organizational Ability factor, I think there are areas within the Judgment factor where I simply need to gain more experience in order to gain greater confidence in my abilities in these areas. It is reassuring, however, to see that the collaborators indicated *personal observations* as the primary source of evidence in rating me between Highly Effective and Outstandingly Effective in this factor; direct, first-hand experience with a leader's ability in a certain area is likely the most valid source for assessment. Therefore, while I may have questions about how successful I am within this factor, it appears that the high ratings of my collaborators stem mostly from their personal observations of my performance.

In my experience, it can take many years at an institution of higher education to develop sound Judgment skills. Austin, Browne, Haas, Kenyatta and Zulueta (2013) found that higher education offers a unique experience in building collaboration as there sometimes is a divide between faculty and staff, differing priorities between departments, and sometimes the impression of a lack of shared governance. Sometimes due to turnover in administrative positions or restructuring efforts, I find it difficult to recognize relationships among the issues in my office and how they may affect areas of the institution. I am often uncertain in my ability to see the "big picture" in certain decision-making tasks within my role as the Stafford Campus Coordinator at UMW. Issues such as scheduling routine maintenance on campus or deciding to close a building early during a holiday week present challenges when considering the different areas that may be affected. It may be easy to recognize how those that work at the Stafford Campus will be affected by such decisions, but it is a greater challenge to consider less obvious

impacts that my decisions may have. Sometimes I feel it is impossible to determine every single element that comes into play when deciding upon certain issues.

While I may find myself struggling at times to assure myself that I have considered all relevant factors when making decisions, I believe that I effectively communicate the rationale for my decisions. Perhaps the disparity between the mean of my responses and the mean of my collaborators' responses is indicative of setting my own expectations too high in the Judgment factor. I am approximately halfway through my career in higher education and many years of experience lie ahead for me to hone my decision-making skills.

### **Limitations**

I believe there are certain limitations when analyzing the data collected in the LSA (VCU EDL, 2019). For example, a certain degree of modesty is sometimes inherent when one assesses one's own abilities. While I answered every question as honestly as possible, I could envision how others may provide lower scores as to not create personal ratings that appear to be too high. Conversely, since respondents were informed that they were answering questions as part of my program at VCU, they may have been more likely to be overly generous with their responses if they believed it might assist with my performance in the program (even with the condition of anonymity in mind). With these two issues in mind, it is notable that the collaborators rated me higher than I rated myself in all factors of the assessment because it may confirm the premise of the limitations: I rated myself lower than is truly accurate and my collaborators rated me higher than is truly accurate. Perhaps the truth is that the means of my responses and the means of my collaborators' responses are even closer than they already appear to be.

### **Conclusion**

Self-examination is a necessary tool in order to learn and grow as a leader. Additionally, I have found that if one is committed to engaging in serious analysis and self-reflection, the feedback of others is invaluable in determining one's strengths and weaknesses. By comparing my LSA (VCU EDL, 2019) responses with the responses of my collaborators, I have gained greater insight into the areas of leadership that my collaborators and I believe I excel in as well as areas of my leadership style in which improvement is needed. Due to how closely my responses aligned with the responses of the collaborators, I am pleased that my overall positive estimation of my leadership abilities is consistent with the perspective of others. I conduct myself as a leader with specific goals in mind to establish strong connections with others. It is gratifying to discover the positive impression I have made on those that I work.

The responses of my collaborators appear to confirm that I possess a very good reputation as a leader (4.59 average rating among all four factors) at my institution, rating me to operate between Highly Effective and Outstandingly Effective across all four factors. However, I am more concerned with my own responses because as much praise as I may receive from others, ultimately it is how I personally feel about my performance that matters the most to me. I agree with my high ratings from collaborators in the Oral and Written Communication and Teamwork factors, but I do not agree with their relatively high ratings for me in the Organizational Ability and Judgment factors.

Over the last few years, I have arrived at the conclusion that hard work, determination, and a commitment to others are only part of what makes an impactful leader. I began the Ed.D. in Leadership program at VCU because I feel that I need to improve my confidence level in my leadership and management ability (Caffrey, 2019). The Organizational Ability and Judgment factors in my opinion are the areas that mostly deal with leadership and management ability. I

hope that throughout the program I gain the knowledge and confidence I need to feel more comfortable with any future career opportunities that may involve the need to develop stronger organizational and judgment abilities.

Thus far, I have been able to take certain concepts that I have learned during the early stages of the Ed.D. program such as the team development practices of Lencioni's *Five Dysfunctions of a Team* (2002) and the theories of the MBTI (Myers & Briggs Foundation, 2003) and the TKI (Thomas & Kilmann, 2007) and apply what I have learned in my everyday practice as a leader; I am more cognizant now of team dynamics and why different individuals may react in different ways when working together or dealing with conflict. The LSA (VCU EDL, 2019) is yet another tool that I can use to evaluate how I operate as a leader. The responses of others are important to consider, but my own responses serve as the reminder as to why I am pursuing an Ed.D. in Leadership—to grow professionally in the leadership areas that need improvement so they match the areas in which I am already performing strongly. I believe one should never cease to seek opportunities for self-assessment. I look forward to completing the LSA again after I have completed the Ed.D. program in order to analyze the progress I hope to make as a leader.

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