

The Hawthorne Effect

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, experiments were carried out at a Western Electric facility in Illinois, USA. There were a number of different studies conducted; looking at the effect of different working conditions and incentives on performance, but it is the studies that relate to how the factory was lit that are most commonly cited. In these, the researchers hoped to determine the optimum levels of factory-floor lighting needed to maximise productivity. It transpired that, because the employees knew about the study, they responded to each adjustment in lighting by increasing productivity, and also tried harder when the lights were dimmed because they knew they were being watched.

This became known as the Hawthorne Effect, a term coined by Landsberger in 1955, in reference to Hawthorne Works - the name of the factory where the studies took place. Whilst there have been critiques of the work and the conclusions drawn, this term is still used today to describe situations whereby subjects improve an aspect of their behaviour or performance in response to some form of measurement or experimental study.

Its impact in today's workplace

So what might the Hawthorne effect tell us about measuring an employee's performance through a 360 degree review? It suggests that, simply because they are being 'measured', 360 degree participants would respond by demonstrating the competencies more often, more clearly or more consistently. However, even if this happens, would it bring about lasting behavioural change, or would participants revert to old patterns of behaviour once the 360 degree process is considered to be over i.e. the report safely filed away and forgotten?

We know that feedback (see our previous article on this on our web site) is a useful tool in raising self-awareness and facilitating long-term improvements in performance, but we also know that feedback, by itself, is not enough. Many organisations have found that, by introducing 360 degree feedback, they have unwittingly created a somewhat warped Hawthorne Effect - whereby employees that have participated in a feedback process have temporarily 'raised the bar' due to the perceived heightened expectations of them. There may be an initial increase in performance or change in behaviour as a result of the feedback, but the heightened expectations and lack of follow up or ongoing support for behavioural change often leads to a subsequent decrease in performance and a failure to maximise the return on investment.

This increase in performance, albeit temporary, can be quite revealing. If an employee can demonstrate the types of desirable behaviours that go beyond what might be considered their 'norm' then this presents an opportunity to find ways to make this increase more permanent and sustainable. Performance dipping back to prior levels is clearly a performance management issue, and to some degree an engagement problem whereby the manager has not created the environment for the employee to want to extend themselves.

Harnessing the effect

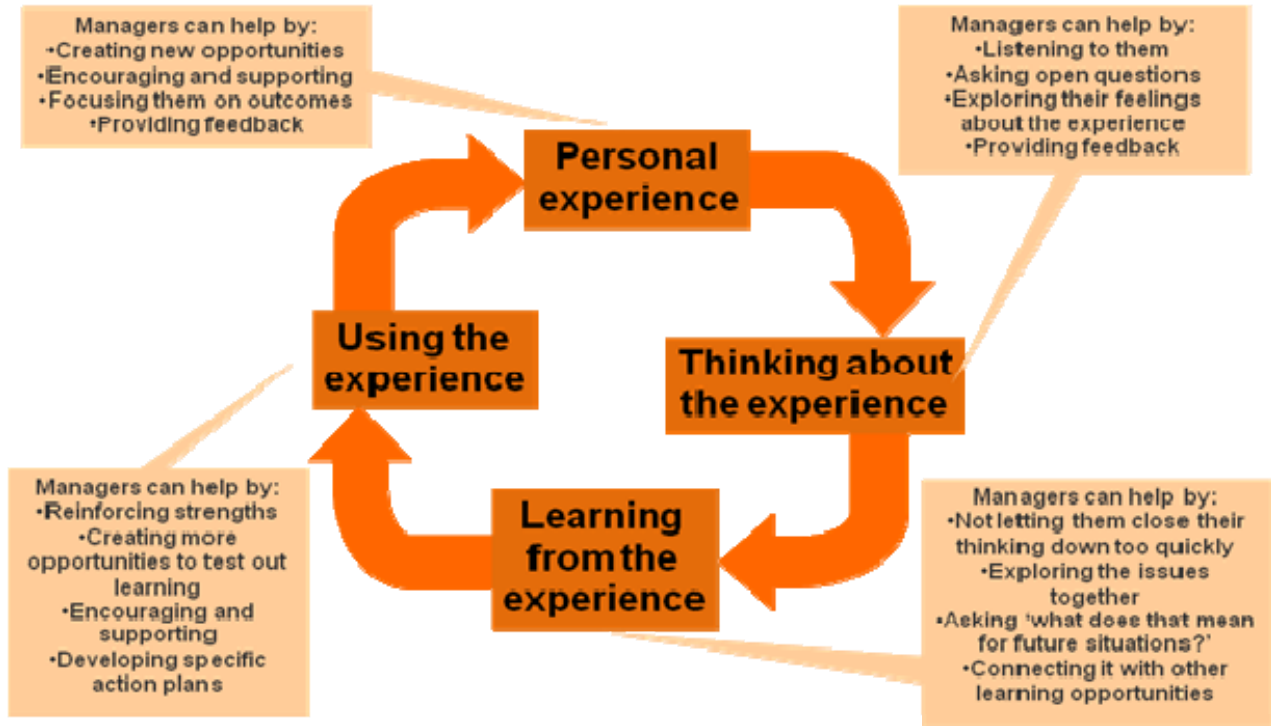
Going back to a well-known model of human learning, we know that there is a continuous cycle of experience, feedback, reflection, practise and reinforcement required for us to acquire and retain new skills (Kolb, 1984), and this can be usefully be applied to any development activity in order to bring about lasting change.

Applying this model to 360, the 'personal experience' of receiving a detailed, in-depth report is best followed by a period of reflection, where the recipient explores what the data means to them and makes linkages with other information about their performance.

The recipient, often given time to do this individually, will benefit from a feedback session with a coach or someone who is experienced and skilled in facilitating 360 feedback, This coach, equipped with a range of techniques and models at their disposal helps the individual 'unpack' the data and transform this into meaningful development actions. It is here that support for a 360 programme often ends.

How to harness the 'Hawthorne Effect' to achieve lasting performance improvement

The impact of receiving the feedback and the creative and purposeful activity of creating a plan easily wears off, when back in the workplace, with competing demands for time and attention.



Kolb, 1984.

So, during the structured development planning period (learning from, and using, the experience), the individual, in collaboration with their coach/manager sets themselves some clear, measurable goals that relate directly to the feedback and measurements made during the 360 degree review. We have often seen development goals that bear little relation to the competences/indicators used in the 360 review. This lack of relevance of the development goal is often its undoing and stems from using generic 360 questionnaires that can be unrelated to the role of the individual and the organisational context.

Embedding the drive for development and higher performance

Our Talent® software now includes an interactive development planning tool which encourages both coach and 'coachee' to set developmental goals and the specific actions needed to achieve them. It then provides e-mail reminders to both parties to ensure plans are followed up and acted upon, and helps to ensure that key milestones and opportunities for development are not missed by the participant. A coach can also access a report screen that shows when an individual's development plan was last updated and how many development goals within each are overdue.

Effective communication
 Communicates ideas and information effectively, both verbally and in writing. Uses language and a style of communication that is appropriate to the situation and people being addressed. Makes sure that others understand what is going on.

Goal	Update Due	Updates
Ensures performance targets are clear and understandable to others	17/11/2009	(12/11/2009 08:41 Ruth Battle) Hammer's book has a useful checklist - I'll prepare one for next week's meeting and see how it goes (09/11/2009 16:45 Tom Riley) I can recommend 'Goal Setting 101' (04/11/2009 12:29 Tom Riley) Investigate the learning resources available in L&D on setting goals and communicating targets
Uses different influencing tactics depending on the other person's style or agenda	19/11/2009	(12/11/2009 08:43 Ruth Battle) I have decided to use the stats from the CSR review for last quarter. I'll put it to them in those terms at tomorrow's Business Improvement Review and see if they buy-in to the idea of making changes to call handling based on this data (04/11/2009 12:28 Tom Riley) Prepare in advance to understand the best influencing style for the Ops Team
Successfully influences those they do not manage	02/12/2009	(04/11/2009 12:29 Tom Riley) Focus on building rapport with the Team Leaders in Customer Services

How to harness the 'Hawthorne Effect' to achieve lasting performance improvement

This offers a number of benefits. Firstly, it means that development goals and the outcomes of a 360 review are less likely to get buried or forgotten, thus greatly improving the likelihood that the organisation (as well as the individual themselves) will see a return on their investment in the process, in the form of enhanced performance. Secondly, it ensures that, by linking personal development plans to the competencies measured in 360, individual learning efforts will be aligned with organisational priorities, values and competencies (provided these are what the questionnaire is comprised of in the first place!). Individuals can also add personal goals that are more directly linked to their longer-term career plans, or to the development of knowledge and skills that are specific to their current role. We provide adherence to the International Coaching Federations' Code of Ethics to keep these goals private to the coach and coachee to increase the value of the tool and protect the level of trust created in the relationship.

Another key benefit is that the online nature of the tools enables the coach and coachee to have a focused discussion - using the feedback and co-creating a development plan, often over the telephone. Our clients are telling us that telephone feedback is being more widely used as a means of delivery as working patterns and locations become more flexible. The e-mail reminders also serve to drive and prompt an ongoing dialogue which helps to embed behavioural change and increase motivation to pursue development goals.

Finally, with the coach and coachee agreeing, planning and documenting development goals using the tool to track progress, actions, reflections and key learning points, progress can be clearly tracked and measured, with individuals being held accountable for actioning their plans. This can provide supporting evidence for the return on investment in both 360 and coaching. In addition, subsequent 360 reviews can be carried out, perhaps 18-24 months after the initial review, to provide further ROI data in the form of increased competency ratings.

HR can tailor and scale training & development activities proactively and efficiently

The HR organisation can also track the goals that are being pursued and how they relate to the competencies used in the organisation. Imagine how useful it is to know, at a glance, how many employees have set themselves development goals relating to the competence of Effective Communication or even a behaviour such as 'the ability to inspire others into willing action'!

Training and development spend, tailored to meet these needs is much more efficiently allocated and if volume in one area is seen to be particularly high, then alternate training provision can be made to support higher volumes such as e-learning. If you have anticipated this demand, then these learning and development options can be automatically added as development goals to the individual's development plan (based on their competence scores). They can then choose to review these suggested goals and then enrol on the courses or add them to their learning plan, all with a single click.

So, back to the 360 Hawthorne Effect.

Could we say that these increments in competency ratings would be explained by the fact that the individual increased their performance in response to the fact that they were 'being measured'? With a facilitated development planning process, like the one described above, it becomes a real possibility to make the temporary uplift in competency ratings more permanent with specific, planned and directed development actions. HR can demonstrate its role in this performance improvement, yet still show increasing efficiency and effectiveness.

This certainly is 'more with less', and comes not a moment too soon.