

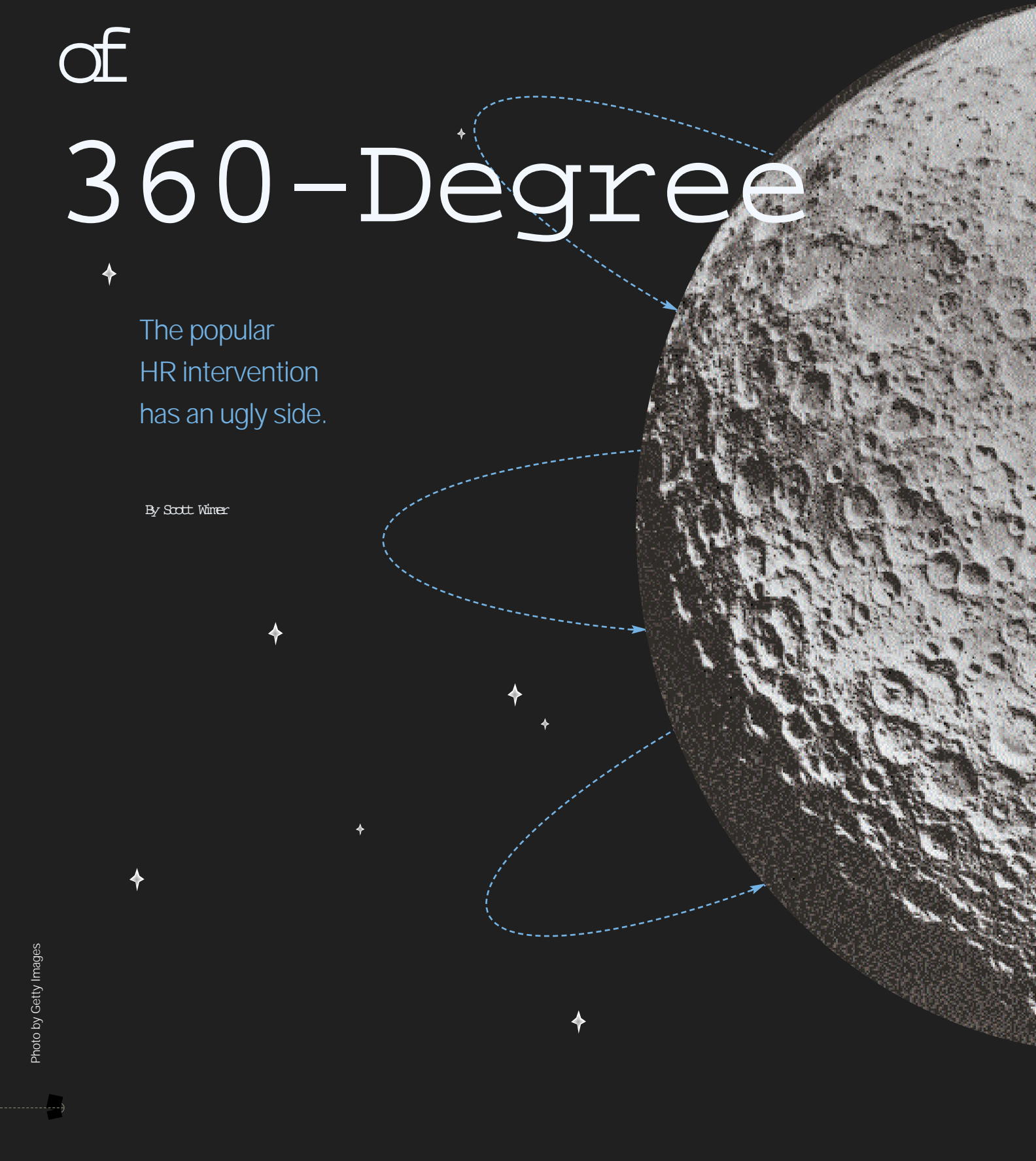
# The Dark Side

of

# 360-Degree

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The popular  
HR intervention  
has an ugly side.

By Scott Winter



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**D**uring the past decade, 360-degree feedback has become one of the most popular human resource interventions. The power behind this process is that it's a sometimes rare opportunity for employees to receive honest feedback about how they're perceived by their peers. Most organizations use it for multisource feedback as part of their management development or performance appraisal processes, or on an ad hoc basis with individuals. The idea is that if employees are armed with better self-awareness, they can make important changes in their work behavior.

Yet, the honesty intrinsic to 360-degree feedback also makes it dangerous. Take this example:

Based on his strong technical background and track record as a successful manager, Ed was hired to manage a technical department at Allitech. After four years at Allitech, Ed's department had accomplished its objectives, and he received good performance reviews and bonuses each year. But after a major project, Ed's boss suggested that he participate in the 360-degree feedback program. Ed knew that while under stress, he had been a little hard on a few poorer performing workers. He still believed, however, that he had an excellent reputation and assumed his feedback would reflect that.

Ed was shocked when he read the feedback from the 19 of his staff members who filled out the questionnaire. It looked as if four or five respondents hated him, another four or five thought he was great, and the rest gave mixed reviews.

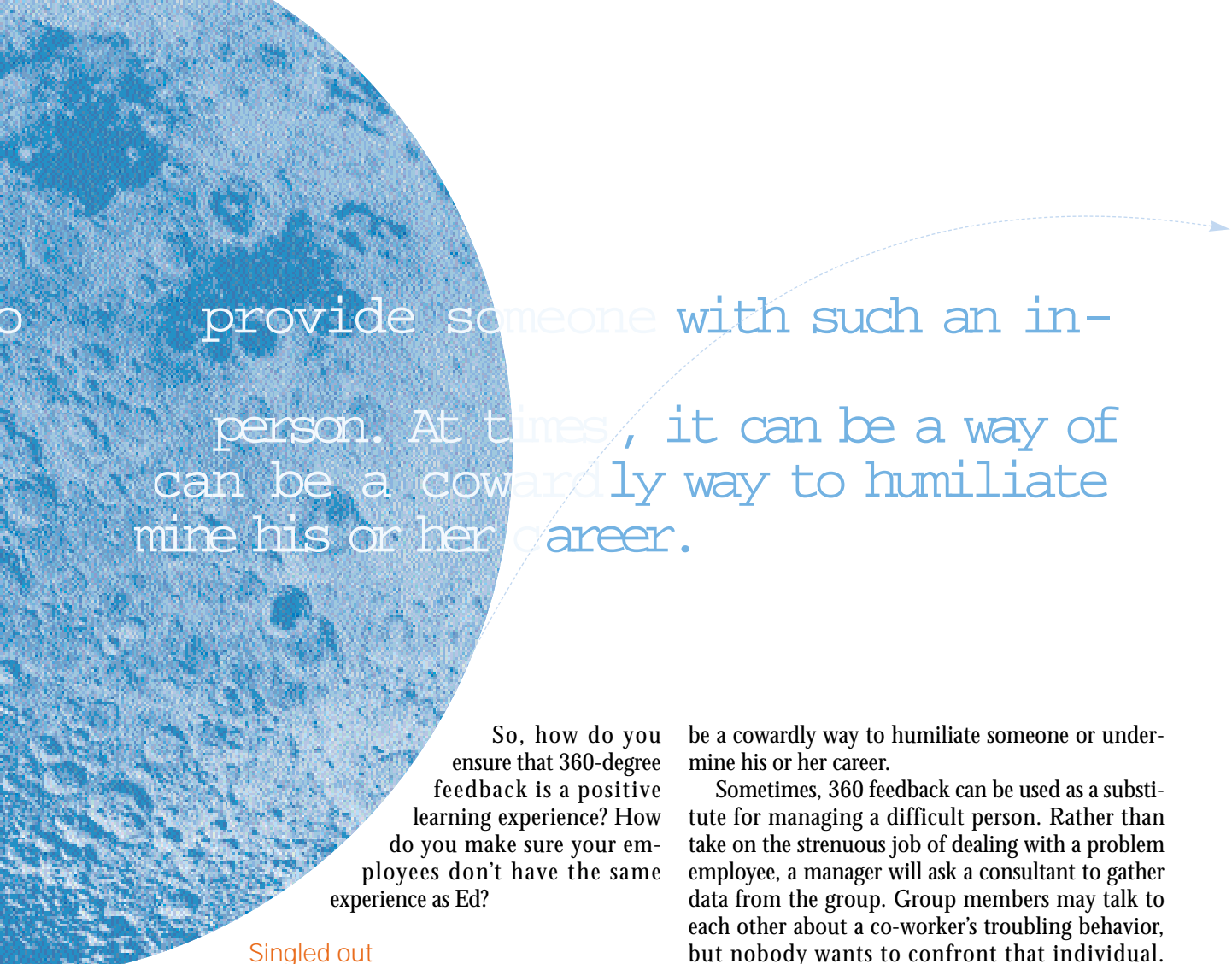
Ed couldn't believe he was no longer considered a

good manager. He wondered whether he was being subjected to this process because his boss felt threatened by him or some of his more competitive colleagues were trying to undermine him. Ed also wondered whether the results would have been different if the other 12 members of his staff had filled out the surveys.

Although there was some truth to the feedback, the experience didn't settle well with Ed. The extent to which people were going after him seemed out of proportion. However, he agreed to work with a consultant to address some of the problems, which helped Ed come to a few realizations. For example, he learned that when he reprimanded a few workers, it affected the morale of the whole team. Still, he never felt the same at Allitech. He thought he'd been picked on and that the opinions of some immature people were given too much weight.

Ed left Allitech for another company. Other factors entered into that decision, but his experience with 360-degree feedback definitely played a big role.

When overloaded with work or life responsibilities, people are sometimes unable to take in disturbing feedback and become defensive. If defensive behavior becomes a pattern, co-workers may find it uncomfortable to work with that employee. That's how someone can lose sight of how others really perceive him or her. That person may deflect responsibility for his or her actions, refuse to accept feedback, and become less effective.



provide someone with such an intense learning experience for that person. At times, it can be a way of punishing or keeping in line. At worst, it can be a cowardly way to humiliate someone or undermine his or her career.

So, how do you ensure that 360-degree feedback is a positive learning experience? How do you make sure your employees don't have the same experience as Ed?

#### Singled out

Basically, 360-degree feedback is used under one of two conditions: 1) the "no stigma" scenario in which everyone participates (everyone in the organization, in a particular department, or in a leadership development program) or 2) an individual seeks intensive personal development assistance or is singled out.

Ideally, the process maximizes a person's learning opportunities and the perceptions of others are managed with sensitivity. When employees excel in some areas but are weak in others, 360-degree feedback can help them realize their potential and prevent career derailment.

When only one person is going through the process, there's a potential for unpleasant results, especially if he's targeted by management as needing special development or corrective attention. The fact that the person is going through a feedback process may lead to the impression that she's considered a problem child or is on the way out of the company.

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Sometimes, 360 feedback can be used as a substitute for managing a difficult person. Rather than take on the strenuous job of dealing with a problem employee, a manager will ask a consultant to gather data from the group. Group members may talk to each other about a co-worker's troubling behavior, but nobody wants to confront that individual. Instead, the person gets a feedback report containing a summary of the group's opinions or a set of anonymous verbatim comments.

People tend to feel freer to "go after someone" when acting as part of a like-minded group. And anonymity makes it easier to vent rather than be constructive. That doesn't mean feedback providers should water down their opinions, but they should be accurate and responsible, and avoid cheap shots.

#### Unconstructive feedback

Words can sting, as anyone who has ever received negative feedback knows. The sting can be even more disturbing when the origin is unclear and you're left to wonder about the source and accuracy of the feedback.

The goal of 360-degree feedback isn't to lash out at a particular person; it's to ensure that the right people provide feedback. Feedback providers should be selected carefully to represent those who know the person best. To ensure appropriate responses, it's best to provide instruction on how to give behavioral feedback that's balanced and constructive.

More important, the environment should be one

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in which people feel safe expressing themselves. If people live in a climate of fear, they'll find reasons to neglect giving feedback, or, if they provide feedback, they'll dilute it to avoid the potential wrath of an angry recipient.

When done well, feedback should be an accurate snapshot that's neither overly positive nor overly negative. It should provide a range of differing reactions so that the recipients receive a full and valid impression of where they stand overall. They should be able to understand which behaviors are generally well received and which they could benefit from changing.

A report that appears biased can be dismissed readily. An overly negative report that isn't behaviorally specific can give recipients an exaggerated or overgeneralized impression of how others perceive them, which can be devastating. Also, it can trigger a recipient to react even more negatively.

## Hazardous feedback

Recipients aren't the only victims of hazardous feedback; so is the organization. People who feel victimized by feedback are more likely to spread their negativity to those they believe are responsible. The most obvious potential for abuse happens when confidentiality is compromised.

For the process to work, people must trust that their confidentiality and anonymity will be safeguarded, which you can achieve only through a carefully thought-out plan and monitoring the process closely.

Honoring confidentiality is tricky. A common problem occurs when a report clusters feedback providers into different groups (for example, direct reports versus peers or customers). If any group contains fewer than five people, the ground is fertile for recipients to take an educated guess about the feedback source. Although it's likely they'll guess incorrectly, they may feel justified in trying to retaliate.

It isn't uncommon for a recipient to attempt retribution towards a whole group or department. The more wounded someone is, the more inclined to strike back. The injured party may seek vengeance against a whole category of people (such as direct reports). When stakes are high (such as when 360-degree feedback is part of the performance appraisal process), that problem can be severe.

## Insensitivity

When distributing feedback, ensure that it's delivered with care and sensitivity, and that recipients feel supported—because there are dangers to watch out for. Someone who has low emotional intelligence and problems getting along with others isn't likely to get feedback in the course of everyday life. (Who would want to stick their necks out and offer it?) So when that person receives feedback, he or she is taken off guard and feels the full force of peers' responses.

To make matters worse, the recipients may feel as if they're on trial, yet they don't want to come across as defensive. This is the time they need the most support. When emotions are raw, it can

be a pivotal opportunity for self-examination and change.

For people to make significant changes, they must first have a clear picture of themselves. Then, they must feel safe and supported. Even if people's jobs are in jeopardy, they'll feel better about making the necessary changes if they feel good about themselves. Potentially, they can frame the experience as a difficult but positive challenge rather than a personal indictment.

Support is key. A good facilitator or coach can help negative feedback recipients

- accept the validity of the feedback, rather than write it off because they think the process is flawed or feedback providers have their own agendas
- take in the feedback with minimal damage to self-esteem
- focus on which aspects of their character are appreciated and which behaviors they should continue
- focus on behaviors that cause the most difficulty, and select a few to work on.

Unfortunately, the emphasis is often only on changing undesirable behaviors. That can seem so daunting that recipients don't know where to start.

### The hit and run

Getting hit by a heavy dose of negative feedback is painful, and it's naïve to think that insight alone will inspire the recipient to change. Without ongoing support and follow-up, it's hard to make the most of this learning experience. In addition, because everyone learns in different ways, it's important to allow time for change to occur.

The more change that's required, the more someone will need help and support. A skilled and supportive coach can be a valuable ally when he or she has no agenda other than wanting to help the person succeed. If a professional coach isn't available, bosses or colleagues who are committed to helping the person can take this role. But they need instruction on how to support someone's change efforts. Inevitably,

A lot can go wrong if you aren't prepared to run a 360-degree feedback program. With careful planning and mindful implementation, however, you can avoid the pitfalls. Here are some guidelines.

Be clear about the purpose. Is the process intended solely for people's development, or will it also affect their performance reviews? If it's part of the performance management process, be sure to work out all of the kinks first. Insist on following all agreements as stated, and be vigilant about honoring the spirit of the process throughout. Watch out for hidden agendas.

Appreciate the subtleties. This intervention unlocks hidden issues and unblocks communication channels. When issues that have gone unstated are finally aired, there may be discomfort for the givers and receivers of feedback. Be available to provide support and reassurance.

Seek help and advice from others. Many organizations have tried 360-degree feedback. You can learn much from success stories and failed attempts. Colleagues in similar industries or organizations with like cultures often can provide better tips than consultants who downplay the problems of 360.

Consider the legitimate needs of all stakeholders. If possible, include people with different perspectives in the planning process. Be especially sensitive to the needs of people who are likely to receive negative feedback.

Take your time. Think through the potential problems in advance. Most abuse occurs as a result of sloppiness or not knowing what to do when unexpected problems arise, not because people manipulate the process deliberately.

Have air-tight agreements. Know how you'll handle confidentiality, and be clear about who owns the data after it's collected. Even if you intend the process to be solely for development purposes, sharing data can change that.

Heed the red flags. The cost of upsetting someone who wants to engage in a potentially flawed process is small compared to the cost of doing it anyway and hoping for the best. Know when to say no.

people slip, so it's important how co-workers react. They need to see temporary regression as part of the natural process of change and not think that the person isn't sincere in wanting to change.

Change is hard. Helping others change is hard. Setting up an environment in which people can support each other in making changes is harder still. For 360-degree feedback to work, it must be designed carefully and recipients must have the active support of others.

They also need the skill and courage to make changes.

Can we harness the power of this tool to produce the results we know it can? TD

**Scott Wimer**, of Wimer Associates in Santa Monica, California, specializes in coaching, 360-degree feedback, facilitating difficult teams, and managing stress; [wimer@ucla.edu](mailto:wimer@ucla.edu).