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Executive Blind Spots
Discrepancies Between Self- and Other-Ratings

Fabio Sala *HayGroup*

Scholars and practitioners have suspected that higher level managers and executives have larger discrepancies between self-assessments and other-ratings (e.g., peers, managers, direct reports) than lower level employees. However, very little research has specifically tested this relationship, and the findings from the few studies that have are inconsistent. The present study examined this relationship with a 360-degree survey instrument administered to 1,214 individuals from a wide variety of organizations and industries. Results showed that higher level employees (e.g., senior executives) had greater discrepancy between self- and other-ratings than lower level individuals (e.g., managers and individual contributors). Implications are significant because research has shown that self-awareness is positively associated with important management and leadership outcomes. Suggestions for leaders and practitioners are discussed.

Practitioners and organizational consultants, based on their experiences with clients, firmly believe that multirater or 360-degree feedback systems enhance self-knowledge and can consequently improve managerial behaviors. Scholarly research has confirmed that higher levels of congruence between managerial "self" and "other" behavioral ratings is associated with various managerial and leadership outcomes (Atwater, Ostroff, Yammarino, & Fleenor, 1998; Atwater, Roush, Fischthal, 1995; Atwater & Yammarino, 1992; Church, 1997; Hazucha, Hezlett, & Schneider, 1993; Johnson & Ferstl, 1999; London & Beatty, 1993; Van Velsor, Taylor, & Leslie, 1993). Similarly, previous research has validated the assumption that multirater feedback, when compared against self-perceptions, can enhance self-awareness and behavioral change (Church, 2000). In fact, a fair amount of evidence has shown a link between self-awareness and individual performance (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992; Church & Waclawski, 1999; Van Velsor et al., 1993). Furthermore, because self-ratings have been shown to be poor predictors of performance (Church, 2000; Harris & Schaubroech, 1988; Sala & Dwight, 2002) and they typically demonstrate a leniency bias (Church, 1997; Podsakoff & Organ, 1986; Van Velsor et al., 1993), behavioral ratings by others (i.e., peers, subordinates, manager) serve an important role. First, they provide insights into the behaviors that predict performance (Church, 2000; Sala & Dwight, 2002), and second, they promote self-awareness and provide feedback for individual development and change.

The relationship between self–other discrepancy and job level has received some attention from practitioners (e.g., Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002) who have asserted that self–other discrepancy is greater for higher level managers; however, very few empirical studies were found to support this observation (Conway & Huffcutt, 1977). A more recent study (Church, 1997) also did not find a relationship between self–other discrepancy and job level. Leaders in the business world (e.g., Gerstner, 2002) intuitively understand the value of feedback at

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Fabio Sala, HayGroup, McClelland Center for Research and Innovation, 116 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02116. E-mail: Fabio_Sala@haygroup.com

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all levels; in fact, they attempt to change the culture of their organization such that people are encouraged to provide open and honest feedback when appropriate. Business writers (Byrne, 1991) have referred to the problem of lack of feedback as the "CEO disease," whereby leaders are sometimes denied accurate information about important issues. For various reasons, people become reluctant to provide bad news or honest feedback to higher level managers and executives.

The current study tested this assumption, that is, whether higher level employees had greater discrepancies between self- and other-ratings than lower level employees. One might argue that because self-awareness is positively associated with managerial performance, higher level (i.e., more successful) managers, given their success, ought to possess a better understanding of themselves. However, it is also possible that as managers move up within an organization, there are fewer sounding boards and thus fewer opportunities to get feedback from others. Therefore, higher level managers may have less opportunity to calibrate their self-perceptions against those of others, and consequently their self-image can be skewed. The present study explored the relationship between self–other discrepancy and job level with a multirater measure of emotional intelligence competencies. It was hypothesized that self–other discrepancy scores would be greater for those individuals who have higher level jobs.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study were taken from an Emotional Competence Inventory (ECI) database that contained 3,627 participants. Because of missing demographic data, the present study was based on the 1,214 participants who reported their job level. Seven hundred forty-one (61%) of the participants were men, whereas 461 (38%) were women (1% missing). Participants reflected relatively broad age groups: 5% were between the ages of 20–29, 21% were 30–39, 28% were 40–49, 16% were 50–59, 2% were over 60 years old, and 30% (364) of these data were missing. The majority of participants were well-educated: 46% had advanced degrees, 37% were college graduates, 8% had some college, 5% were secondary school graduates, 1% did not graduate from secondary school, and 3% of these data were missing. The majority of participants were Caucasian (82%), 4% were African American, 3% were Asian, 4% were Hispanic, 4% were "other," and the remaining 3% of these data were missing. Participants also served various functions (e.g., finance, human resources, research and development, sales, marketing, technical, manufacturing, executive/general management, and so forth) within a wide variety of industries (e.g., technology, financial, retail, government, food products, pharmaceuticals, health care, and so forth).

Emotional Competence Inventory

The ECI is a multirater survey instrument that assesses self-, manager, direct report, and peer ratings on a series of behavioral indicators of emotional intelligence competencies (Goleman, Boyatzis, & Hay Group, 1999). Previous research has demonstrated adequate reliability and validity evidence for the ECI (Sala, 2002). Participants rated themselves on the ECI and were also rated by others (i.e., peers, managers, and direct reports). Participants were rated on average by 1.22 managers, 5.76 direct reports, and 4.55 peers. Average scores for each competency were computed, and competency gap or discrepancy scores were calculated. Competency gap/discrepancy scores were participants' overall, average-item self-score minus their overall, average-item total others score. A positive gap indicates that participants rated themselves higher than did others on a particular competency. A negative gap indicates that participants tended to rate themselves lower than did others. A score near zero represents a lack of gap between self- and other-ratings (i.e., accurate self- vs. other perception). Several methods exist for the calculation of self–other discrepancy, each reflecting various mathematical and analytic purposes and strengths (Church, 1997). The simple method used in this study was chosen to reflect the typical process by which managers and executives compare their average-item self-scores against

their average-item total other ratings when receiving feedback from a multirater assessment instrument.

To assess job level, participants responded to the following 6-point scale: 1 = entry-level individual contributor, 2 = mid-level individual contributor, 3 = senior-level individual contributor, 4 = first-level manager, 5 = mid-level manager, and 6 = senior-level manager. On the basis of participants' responses, a low and high job level rating was created: Job Levels 1–3 were considered low (n = 227), and Job Levels 4–6 were considered high (n = 987).

Results

One-way analyses of variance were computed to test for differences between high- and low-level participants on all 20 competencies. Table 1 shows that competency gap scores were significantly higher for higher level participants than lower level participants on 19 of 20 competencies (all but organizational awareness), supporting the hypothesized relationship between job level and self–other discrepancy.

Mean scores (Table 1) for higher and lower level participants revealed some interesting patterns. Nearly all competency gap scores for high-level participants were positive. This suggests that higher level participants consistently overrate themselves. The majority of competency gap scores for lower level participants were negative or around zero. This suggests that lower level participants are more likely to see themselves as others see them. A gap score of zero indicates that, on average, there was no difference between how participants rated them-

Table 1
Overall ECI Competency Self–Other Gap Score Differences Between Lower and Higher Job-Level Participants

	Job level					
	Low (n = 227)		High (n = 987)			
Competency	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*F*	*p*
Emotional self-awareness	.20	0.98	.52	.97	13.59	.000
Accurate self-assessment	-.01	0.78	.29	.83	17.33	.000
Self-confidence	-.23	0.81	.07	.76	18.81	.000
Empathy	.08	0.87	.27	.88	6.13	.014
Organizational awareness	-.07	1.03	.04	.90	1.93	.165
Service orientation	-.07	1.10	.21	.92	10.63	.001
Self-control	-.29	1.02	.02	.99	12.19	.001
Trustworthiness	.27	0.97	.56	.90	12.83	.000
Conscientiousness	-.20	0.98	.06	.90	9.92	.002
Adaptability	.17	0.89	.32	.85	3.90	.049
Achievement orientation	.09	0.85	.32	.84	9.13	.003
Initiative	-.09	0.90	.28	.79	26.97	.000
Developing others	.08	1.09	.35	.95	9.95	.002
Leadership	-.11	1.14	.12	.98	6.09	.014
Influence	.02	0.95	.21	.87	5.78	.016
Communication	.01	0.99	.27	.88	10.79	.001
Change catalyst	.08	1.02	.30	.88	7.31	.007
Conflict management	.02	1.07	.30	.97	10.01	.002
Building bonds	-.38	1.08	-.17	.94	6.18	.013
Teamwork and collaboration	-.10	0.85	.26	.80	24.40	.000

Table 2
North American Competency Gap Norms and Correlations Between Gap Scores and Job Level

	Gap norms ($N = 3,627$)		Job level ($N = 1,214$)	
Competency	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Emotional self-awareness	.50	0.99	.12	.000
Accurate self-assessment	.24	0.84	.14	.000
Self-confidence	.03	0.79	.19	.000
Empathy	.28	0.85	.12	.001
Organizational awareness	.02	0.94	.08	.03
Service orientation	.17	1.01	.14	.000
Self-control	-.01	1.02	.15	.000
Trustworthiness	.51	0.92	.15	.000
Conscientiousness	.03	0.88	.14	.000
Adaptability	.26	0.86	.11	.003
Achievement orientation	.26	0.87	.11	.002
Initiative	.19	0.84	.18	.000
Developing others	.32	0.96	.11	.002
Leadership	.11	0.99	.10	.003
Influence	.15	0.89	.06	.07
Communication	.22	0.90	.12	.001
Change catalyst	.26	0.92	.12	.001
Conflict management	.25	0.98	.12	.000
Building bonds	-.19	0.99	.10	.004
Teamwork and collaboration	.23	0.83	.18	.000

selves in relation to how they were rated by others. As a comparison to help interpret the above findings, Table 2 includes gap norms calculated from the entire North American ECI database ($N = 3,627$). These norms suggest that, on average, participants tended to overrate themselves, that is, rate themselves higher than they were rated by others, consistent with previous self–other discrepancy research. The gaps were high because the ECI has largely been administered to higher level participants. For example, the average job-level rating for participants in this database was 4.78 ($N = 1,214$; $SD = 1.34$), and 81% of the sample were categorized as high-level. Furthermore, 482 (39.7%) of participants identified themselves as senior-level managers. This may explain, why, on average, participants tended to overrate themselves, because mostly high-level participants are represented in this database.

Table 2 further demonstrates the relationship between job-level and self–other discrepancy. Participants' gap scores were correlated with their self-reported job level, and significant positive correlations were found for most competencies. Although the effect sizes were small, the correlations suggest that higher level participants tended to have bigger gaps between their self–other perceptions—that is, they tend to overrate themselves compared with others. These findings help to more firmly establish a relationship between self-misperception and job level because not only were differences found between high- and low-level participants, but a continuous pattern was revealed through all job levels.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that higher level employees are more likely than lower level individuals to have an inflated view of their emotional intelligence competencies and *less* congruence with the perceptions of others who work with them often and know them well. This information is valuable for managers and practitioners because previous research has firmly established that high-performing managers tend to have more accurate self-perceptions. That is, high-performing individuals' self-perceptions tend to match the perceptions/ratings of others. Therefore, helping managers and executives better understand how they are perceived by others can have significant implications for managing performance improvement.

Although not the principal aim of his research, Church (1997) failed to find a rela-

tionship between self–other discrepancy and management level. This may be because for the purposes of his research a truncated range (i.e., middle vs. senior managers) was used, whereas the current study looked at discrepancy across a wider range of job levels. Furthermore, Church studied *managerial* self- versus other-perceptions. Managerial behaviors may be more overt and therefore less amenable to self-inflation. Perhaps nonverbal feedback from others may be more evident for managerial styles rather than the more subtle competency behaviors. This more informal feedback loop may be essential to the constant process of recalibration of self-perception.

There are a couple of reasonable explanations for the main finding of this study. First, people who are higher within an organization have fewer opportunities for feedback from others simply because there are fewer people above them within the organization who can provide such feedback. Second, it may be that people are less inclined to give constructive feedback to higher status individuals in general. Perhaps even when this information is specifically asked for by managers or executives, people may be less likely to give candid feedback that is less than flattering. Alternatively, although less likely, it may be that because higher level positions require greater job complexity and job responsibilities are less evident, direct reports and some peers are not in a good position to judge the competencies of higher level ratees. As a consequence, raters can inflate the discrepancy by defaulting to so-called middle-of-the-road ratings to be safe in their judgments.

Multirater feedback is thought to be useful because managers can view their strengths and areas of improvement as identified by key constituents against their self-perceptions. The extent to which these comparisons provide meaningful information in part depends upon whether the performance or rating scales are interpreted similarly by the different rater groups. Goudy (1999) examined 360-degree assessments administered to 3,200 senior- and middle-level managers. The findings indicated a lack of convergence across multisource ratings due to (a) different rater sources having fundamentally different conceptualizations of leadership, (b) differences between sources in rating scale calibration, and (c) differences between sources in error variance. Similarly, Hooijberg (2000) also found that people have different perceptions of leadership for different target groups, and Olson (1999) argued that different organizational levels use somewhat different cues as the basis for ratings.

Similarly, the influence of organizational culture can affect attitudes toward feedback and evaluation. After controlling for personality variables (e.g., self-esteem, tendency to seek feedback, work locus of control), Funderburg and Levy (1997) found that contextual variables (e.g., supervisory style, organizational citizenship behavior, perceived costs of asking for feedback, and feedback-seeking environment) accounted for nearly 50% of the variance in multirater appraisal system attitudes. They concluded that contextual factors were more important than personality in determining attitudes toward 360-degree assessment. This is very encouraging for practitioners and managers because it suggests that much can be done to close the gap between self- and other-perceptions and thereby positively affect performance management.

Future Research Directions

The current study was descriptive; future research might explore the process by which higher level participants develop greater discrepancy between self- and other ratings than lower level participants. Moreover, given the few studies conducted, further research is needed to firmly establish the current findings. As shown by previous research, the discrepancy might likely reflect situational cues between higher and lower level positions as well as "personality" differences between

higher and lower level managers in terms of self-awareness. For example, investigators might study whether higher level positions generate self-aggrandizing sentiments. Such sentiments might help provide high-level managers the self-confidence they need to perform their duties; however, they might also paradoxically create difficulties because they contribute to a false understanding of their strengths while similarly overlooking opportunities to develop in areas needing improvement.

A strength of the current study is that multiple organizations and industries were included. Although the extent to which organizational culture influenced the current findings is unknown, the sample was taken from a large database representing numerous organizations and industries. Because the culture of an organization influences, if not dictates, attitudes toward giving and receiving feedback, future work might include an assessment of cultural norms and employee attitudes toward 360-degree assessment and feedback. This future work might help to understand the influence of culture at the organization or unit level and to better identify the forces that promote or hinder self-awareness.

Future work might also attempt to replicate the findings using a larger sample with equal numbers of lower and higher level employees. Although the lower level group was relatively large (n = 227), a larger sample—equal to that of the higher level group—would be an improvement over the current study. Similarly, more research is needed to understand the findings for the lower level participants. Are they really more self-aware? How do they calibrate their self-image with those of others? Other assessment methods might support the above findings or provide insight into the dynamics that lead to discrepancy or alignment. The nature of the 360 assessment (i.e., competency behaviors vs. managerial styles) may influence the degree to which raters can "see" the rating criteria and whether *ratees* can judge the extent to which they can accurately gauge the perceptions of others on the behaviors they are rating. Finally, future research might use a more sensitive measure of job level. For example, respondents in this study with both individual contributor and managerial responsibilities may have had difficulty choosing an appropriate job level.

Practitioner Implications

Practitioners can help managers and executives create a culture of openness and honest feedback—a culture that promotes and embodies "facing the facts" (Collins, 2001) and constant personal improvement. As we have seen, executives' blind spots can be very costly. Indeed, the present study and other empirical research make a strong case for the value of self-awareness (i.e., self–other agreement), and research has found that poor performers tend to overinflate their self-perceptions (Brutus, 1998; Kruger & Dunning, 1999).

First, for individuals, 360-degree feedback can begin the process of self-evaluation and personal performance improvement. Feedback and coaching can help managers and executives navigate their gaps and create action plans for development. Managers and leaders themselves must be made to understand the importance of such feedback. Helping them genuinely communicate to peers and subordinates that they encourage and value feedback is key to closing the gaps. A client who actively promotes "reality testing" and embodies this attitude recently explained to me how he has a "truth table" in his office—that is, whenever he is sitting at that table with anyone, they are not only encouraged but *required* to speak honestly, openly, and constructively about *anything*. "I always have an open door policy when it comes to feedback," exclaimed Steve, an senior VP from a large manufacturer. The key to the success of his approach is that he genuinely means it; people know that they are completely safe and free from retribution.

Although not always easy, the strategy of "putting things right on the table" is very effective for this leader, and he is convinced that he has made better decisions on important business issues and retained high-quality people that have been key to their success. Of course, this practice does not come naturally to everyone, but anyone can adapt and assimilate it to suit his or her personal style. Aside from receiving feedback about individual performance, this practice can also lead to greater clarity around roles, expectations, and business decisions in general.

When managers overrate and see gaps, it becomes all too easy for them to dismiss the feedback by discounting the 360 instrument or arguing that their raters' perceptions are inaccurate. If a manager or executive is resistant in this way, it can be helpful to point out that it does not matter which perspective is right; simply having gaps signals a possible disconnection with peers and direct reports. If a manager believes that competency ratings from his or her peers or direct reports are not valid, consultants might address this by saying, "You're probably right, the only problem is that your peers and direct reports are not seeing it...maybe you just need to show it a little more often or consistently." Although it is a challenging process that requires courage and integrity, practitioners and consultants can help their clients understand the value of closing the gaps and create actionable plans for growth and development.

The findings of this study also have implications for organizations. Leaders may consider developing and promoting a culture of upward feedback where it is safe and people of all levels are encouraged to provide candid feedback in a constructive and appropriate way. If such programs are endorsed and protected by upper management, organizations will slowly change attitudes toward feedback and promote performance improvement at all levels. In the 1950s, Hewlett-Packard (HP) was one of the first American companies to institute these kinds of cultural values. HP was one of the first to conduct extensive surveys to gauge and track employee concerns and to institute open-door policies in which all employees could bring grievances to the top without retribution (Collins, 1994). Although this culture of openness and dialogue is difficult to implement, success at HP has been attributed, in part, to their value of feedback and constant improvement.

Of course, this kind of organization-wide implementation requires much effort and consistency. Indeed, previous research (Funderburg & Levy, 1997) has shown that contextual variables (e.g., cultural values) significantly influence attitudes toward 360-degree feedback systems. Organizations that genuinely value feedback instill confidence in employees that they are safe and that their efforts and courage will be valued and acted on. This is certainly encouraging for business leaders and consultants who work collaboratively to achieve greater leadership and organizational effectiveness.

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