

Everyone Gets a Vote

360 Assessments and the Human Factors System

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Kee your boss happy. This is the recipe for a peaceful and successful career progression. Airmen keep their noncommissioned officers happy, lieutenant colonels keep their colonels happy, generals keep the secretary of the Air Force happy, and the secretary of defense (SecDef) keeps the president happy. It's a perfectly understandable arrangement; in a hierarchical organization, orders are meant to be delivered from higher and executed down the line. The facility and precision with which those orders are executed determine who the next generation of leaders will be. Simply put, those who best adhere to their bosses' directives stand the best chance of becoming bosses themselves. Nowhere in this chain of logic do the words *peer* or *subordinate* appear. The Officer Performance Report (OPR) is the formal paper trail of officers' careers and reflects the performance in the eyes of their superiors only. By functionally ignoring the assessments of officers by peers and subordinates, the Air Force promotes individuals based on an incomplete profile at best and sycophantic behavior at worst. To change the cycle, the USAF would be well-served by incorporating a form of 360-feedback into its performance reports in the form of the Human Factors System (HFS).

The quick rebuttal to the above argument is "if you take care of your troops, they will take care of you."¹ That particular quote was from a security forces squadron commander 10 years ago, but it could have easily come from any commander you or I have ever worked for. On the surface, it makes sense: Why would people work hard for a jerk? However, there is a critical flaw: jerk or not, those commander or raters will still determine the career paths of their subordinates. Therefore, there is a strong incentive to please even a toxic leader, to make them look good almost in spite of themselves—to say nothing of their internal professional dedication. Your OPR/enlisted performance report bullets will not indicate if your boss was good or bad, but they will determine your promotions and opportunities. In our more cynical moments, my peers and I have reflected on leaders we didn't care for and wondered at what point they lost themselves, drank the Kool-Aid, and so forth. Perhaps they were great officers, and we didn't understand their vision. Perhaps they were just goons who got lucky. Or maybe people are creatures who respond to incentives.

Throughout their careers, officers are taught that awards and stratifications are the indicators that will identify high-performing officers and pave the way for career progres-

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sion.² Their immediate supervisors and commanders are the ones who provide those awards and stratifications. Therefore, it is in their self-interest to get along and go along, regardless of whether the task at hand is the wisest course of action. This is a tough thing because it rarely takes the form of a dramatic, fork-in-the-road moment. Col John R. Boyd's iconic "To Be or To Do" speech was first delivered as a result of Air Force budget malfeasance that literally violated a congressional mandate.³ But what's an officer to do when presented with a fork with less than congressional implications? I'm certainly guilty of shutting up and coloring, as are most officers I know. In general, the risk/reward balance at the small unit-level of complying or resisting favors compliance—why challenge the boss over a small decision? By the time an officer has risen to a strategic-level leadership position, the habit pattern of getting along to go along has been firmly entrenched. No matter how many stars are on their shoulders, generals have a boss to please. This is not to say that every leader above a certain level is compromised; simply that our rater input-only OPR system incentivizes pleasing the boss above all else.

It's fair to say that most of us would prefer to identify and remove a toxic leader before we find out on the cover of *Air Force Times*. Without peer and subordinate inputs in the officer evaluation process, identifying poor or toxic leaders before it's too late can be difficult. As stated earlier, most Airmen and officers will execute their duty to the best of their ability, regardless of their boss's performance. Poor officership can, therefore, be camouflaged by quality subordinates and selective statistics. The brief, summary nature of rater input-only OPRs lends itself to a bottom-line mentality that spells out quantifiable results without addressing the manner in which they were achieved. Former 52nd Fighter Wing Command Chief Matthew Grengs concisely addressed the problem: "To an outsider, that particular work center ruled by a toxic leader may look effective, simply because tasks are completed, and deadlines are met. But in the end, such leadership rots away the purpose and motivation of our great force and that damages mission success. But more importantly, it damages people."⁴ Especially in larger organizations, a rater may be hard-pressed to have a finger on the pulse of each individual unit/subordinate, thereby making a bottom-line mentality not only quantifiably satisfying but also easier to execute. A pernicious effect of this mentality is that honing in on bottom-line results can negatively affect trust and relationships in an organization.⁵ A 2005 Army War College (AWC) paper dedicated to studying toxic leadership echoed that assertion: toxic leaders' superiors were either "... oblivious to the toxic behavior, or, more likely, are so satisfied with the results in terms of mission accomplishment that they chose to overlook the human cost of getting the job done."⁶ A similar 2003 AWC paper further assessed that "... toxic leaders are still all-too-familiar to members of the Armed Forces."⁷

Periodically, the DOD and its subordinate branches have attempted to remedy perceived ethical failings in its leaders. In 2003, Secretary of the Army Thomas E. White charged the AWC with assessing ways to detect toxic leaders.⁸ After a rash of very public incidents in 2012, SecDef Leon Panetta ordered a department-wide ethics review.⁹ Aside from specialized offices such as the Inspector General (IG) or Equal Opportunity Office that handle specific complaints, the only formalized tool the Air Force has to assess unit

morale and leader effectiveness is the Unit Climate Assessment (UCA). Notably, its governing regulation, Air Force Instruction 36-2706, *Equal Opportunity Program Military and Civilian*, explicitly states that its purpose is to assess their unit's "human relations climate and to make recommendations for improvements."¹⁰ At its conclusion, the UCA report is owned by the unit.¹¹ At its core, it is an advisory document only. Furthermore, the UCA is only as good as its information. If operating under a toxic leader with a report controlled by the same leader, getting honest feedback is challenging. In his article, *Toxic Leadership*, Col George Reed, USA, noted that the feckless training leader popularized in the series *Band of Brothers* was a known liability, but "characteristically, no soldier officially complained to the chain of command."¹² The word *characteristically* is doing some heavy lifting here, and it provides further evidence that getting formal, honest feedback from subordinates who don't like their superior is difficult. The UCA is a valuable tool but only impacts commanders and doesn't affect their OPR—therefore, its value in improving officer development is limited.

My proposed solution is to incorporate an HFS program into the Air Force's officer evaluation system. The HFS will apply to all captains and above with rating responsibilities. To avoid favor-trading and punitive measures from offended bosses, the HFS will be centralized at a unit's respective IG office with the results provided to raters, direct supervisors, and ratees. That said, the HFS is not in any sense a replacement for attentive supervision—direct supervisors are still the first line of leadership, mentorship, and performance assessment. However, the HFS will not be a mandatory determinative factor for a stratifier—simply an additional data point, designed to offer insight into the officer's performance that the rater would not otherwise have.

The HFS will provide three ratings of a given rater by their peers and subordinates based on three questions:

1. "Is Officer X a good leader?"
2. "Does Officer X put the mission before themselves?"
3. "Does Officer X promote a healthy work environment?"

These questions are designed to produce a general impression of an officer's character, priorities, and capacity to maintain healthy relationships with people in their environment. To be blunt, the questions should indicate if the officer is potentially a toxic leader.

These criteria should be answered with one of three options: yes, no, and I don't know/no opinion (see table). The criteria and responses are simple, and intentionally so: they are supposed to provide a clear, understandable perception of the officer, akin to a thumbs-up/thumbs-down system. An overall sample size would be included in the data; the sample size is contextually critical because not all officers lead similar-sized organizations. A more complicated points-based scale (1 is bad, 10 is best) would be prone to subjective grading criteria (i.e., one person might consider a 5 as bad while others might consider a 1 for similar behavior). Additionally, results could be skewed by a small number of extremely negative or positive ratings.

Table. Perceptions of an officer’s leadership abilities

	Is XX a good leader?		
	Yes	No	No opinion/don't know
No. of responses			
Total percentage			

The basic point is to identify the ends of the bell curve. Most officers have some peers and subordinates who like them and some who don't, thus generating an average rating. Those officers who are exceptionally well-liked or disliked will stand out. The overall objective is not to promote based on these ratings but to provide promotion and leadership boards with additional data points when considering professional advancement. For example, an operations group commander might be rating their squadron commanders and notice that all seem to be high performers based on traditional OPR metrics. That group commander might then notice that one of the commanders has an exceptionally high favorable/unfavorable HFS and use that data to build their stratifications. In a selection board scenario, the intent is similar. While not determinative, a promotion/developmental education board could use the HFS as an additional assessment measure, either to differentiate similarly qualified candidates or identify uniquely high or low scoring individuals. The nondeterminative nature of the HFS is key here—were it to be a mandatorily scored category, it would risk the integrity of the HFS process (i.e., a unit “ganging up” on a disliked boss). Both the rater and the board would view the officer’s record in totality, recognizing that the HFS is only a piece of the puzzle. By applying the HFS to both raters and boards, it accomplishes the intent of recognizing peer/subordinate feedback at both the local and organizational levels.

Unfortunately, responding to incentives poses several challenges to a 360-feedback system as well. In an ideal scenario, all members would do their jobs as best they could without consciously trying to curry favor with their peers and subordinates. Although it has the benefit of increasing organizational buy-in, the danger of employing a 360-degree feedback system is turning leadership into a popularity contest. As with any ratings system, the rater is responsible for analyzing all available data and making judgments based on that information. In the “popularity contest” scenario, a boss who is loved by their unit but doesn't accomplish the mission will likely not progress. The point of the HFS is not to encourage officers to sacrifice mission requirements to the whims of their unit but to identify those who can accomplish the mission while achieving buy-in from their subordinates. Some leaders achieve the mission at the expense of their subordinates, and some leaders achieve high unit morale at the expense of the mission—the HFS will help identify those who can do both.

Another danger is the simple fact that human beings can be capricious, petty, and subjective. Therefore, bringing in peer and subordinate feedback might mean that favoritism could come into play, and that “you get gossip, quantified.”¹³ The term *gossip* itself has a

negative connotation but in fact serves a useful social function and also “. . . has benefits at the group level, motivating people to act in everyone’s best interests, not just their own.”¹⁴ Furthermore, we must acknowledge the reality that our current system is already subject to favoritism—that danger just happens to reside with the rater alone. A recent corporate study found that “56 percent of large company (with more than 1,000 employees) executives with more than one candidate for a promotion already had a favorite. . . three quarters of the survey participants say they have personally witnessed favoritism where they work.”¹⁵

While the Air Force’s unique bureaucracy isn’t the same as large corporations, its members are not uniquely immune to favoritism. Although the USAF prohibits favoritism, those practicing it are usually unaware that they’re doing so. A recent psychological study indicated that promotion decisions can be influenced by subtle “in-group” factors; essentially that one is likely to favor someone they identify with.¹⁶ Recognizing that all humans have the capacity for flawed judgment, it’s wise to spread out the impact. If an officer’s rater, peers, and subordinates all agree that an officer is doing a great job, it’s a safe bet that he/she is not a toxic leader. If an officer’s rater thinks the ratee is doing a great job, but that ratee’s peers and subordinates disagree, there might be some underlying factors worth exploring. Recognizing that humans are flawed creatures, the HFS would aid raters in developing a more complete picture of their subordinates’ performance.

In 2015, the RAND Corporation performed a study of the efficacy of 360 evaluations in the military. The study noted that all services have some form of 360-feedback tool available, but only the Army’s Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback (MSAF) program has been implemented in a widespread manner.¹⁷ Of the four methods listed for the Air Force, three are restricted to colonels or generals, and the fourth is optional, with participant-selected reviewers.¹⁸ Most relevant to this article, the study recommended *against* using a 360-type product in evaluations, citing rater confusion and impact to selection boards.¹⁹

RAND’s critiques of a 360 system have merit but are based on a fundamentally different set of objectives and criteria than the HFS. In general, RAND discusses 360 systems as a method of improving feedback and self-development, whereas an HFS is designed solely as an evaluation aid (however, exceptionally positive or negative results would likely drive discussions with individual raters). This is a critical difference because the most common critiques of 360 systems—complexity and time-intensiveness—result from open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed feedback. The HFS’s three-question, yes/no design is a fundamentally simpler tool.

As the Army’s MSAF program is the only widely-used 360 tool among the four services, RAND sensibly bases some of its critiques on the Army’s experience with it: specifically, its complexity and effect on selection boards. Again, we see an inherently different set of objectives between the MSAF and HFS. The MSAF is a periodic assessment designed for leader development purposes only, incorporating a number of products and online training/assessment tools.²⁰ To improve that development, the MSAF requires dozens of questions and two narrative response questions. Perhaps due to its length and complexity, recent

research from the Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership revealed that “66% of officers and 74% of warrant officers only initiated the MSAF to fulfill and OER block-check requirement; with self-development either a by-product or not sought after at all.”²¹ Additionally, the MSAF’s numerical, absolute scoring method is prone to individual judgments of what constitutes a “good” score.²² From a logistical standpoint, the inclusion of the MSAF’s mass of data in selection/promotion boards (aside from the box-check indicating it was accomplished) would likely prove cumbersome for that board. RAND echoes that concern, and here again the HFS’s simple format and limited scope work in its favor. By minimal effort of the ratee’s peers and subordinates, it minimizes the danger of becoming a box-check and increases its chances of providing simple, yet meaningful feedback.

Although the MSAF and HFS have different means and ends, the MSAF’s mere existence offers a fantastic case study in demonstrated pros and cons of the 360-type model in the armed services. Aside from its complexity and subsequent “box-checking” danger, the MSAF also allows officers to select their own survey population, resulting in potentially biased results.²³ Again, while this system may be effective as a feedback tool, the HFS’s broader methodology avoids that pitfall. A more recent AWC paper echoes that theme and adds that the MSAF (like climate surveys and unlike the HFS) is not designed to identify particularly good or bad leaders.²⁴ Furthermore, the “. . . MSAF feedback reports are not shared with supervisors. . . ,”²⁵ rendering them less useful from a rating/selection board standpoint.

Most importantly for this article, the RAND study notes that the services could “consider other alternatives for incorporating a broader range of perspectives, including from peers and subordinates, into the performance evaluation system—although identifying specific alternatives is beyond the scope of this study.”²⁶ The HFS is one of those specific alternatives. By providing previously unavailable performance and feedback data without a complex, cumbersome 360-feedback process, Air Force raters can better identify both ends of the bell curve and progress those officers accordingly. Officers will be incentivized to meet this new standard to accomplish their mission while achieving buy-in from their unit.

To be clear, the sky is not falling, and the Air Force is not rife with toxic leaders to the best of my knowledge. I’ve been spared that particular curse and have consistently served under commanders I respected. However, that shouldn’t prevent us from searching for new and better ways to pick the best leaders from a truly talented pool. Some officers are better technicians than leaders, some vice versa, some are good at both, and others at neither. If we’re to remain the world’s most advanced and capable air force, we must recognize that putting the right people in the right places is an essential ingredient in that mix. It’s important that we get it right, and that starts by being honest with ourselves. ♣

Notes

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