



For leaders who want to thrive



A new perspective in 360° feedback

“If we work harder, longer, faster, we will finally get in front of the complexity we face. The hamster wheel of stress we’re on will stop soon. But that time never arrived, and it likely never will.”

Renee Moorefield

Thrive: a summary

Thrive is our latest application in 360° feedback processes, building on a database of more than 8,000 leaders, extensive practitioner experience of facilitated debriefs in coaching and leadership programmes, and an emerging set of new leadership challenges and priorities.

Like conventional 360 feedback, Thrive provides an insight from multiple perspectives into leadership effectiveness and impact. Here we see sustained impact as more than tick box ratings of strengths. Effectiveness typically does require at least one outstanding strength, but it also hinges on the interplay of negative counter-productive activities as well as the risks of over-doing strengths. What makes Thrive different? It also:

- factors in the context in which leaders operate. Who is operating with the tail wind of favourable circumstances behind them? Who is up against a head wind of unfavourable circumstances? Without an understanding of context we miss an important dynamic in exploring future gains in leadership performance.
- identifies the drivers of leadership engagement to locate those leaders who are flourishing and on the front foot of strategic innovation and energising execution vs those who are languishing, finding working life personally arduous, and now at risk of undermining business productivity.

The Thrive application provides **high impact personal reports** to support coaching assignments and shape leadership development programmes. These reports open up a powerful conversation to connect the “outer” world of operating context and leadership performance with the “inner world” of personal feelings and motivations.

When deployed within a leadership population, Thrive also gives organisations:

- an **organisational audit of seven contextual factors** that are helping or hindering leadership performance. This provides insight into the “bright spots” supportive of performance as well as the “black holes” which are blocking performance.

- an **analysis of levels of leadership engagement** across the spectrum from the languishing who have lost purpose and meaning to the flourishing whose zest lifts the organisational mood and makes working life a positive experience.
- an **index of employee engagement** based on the consolidation of team member trends to track the impact of context and leadership.

This approach makes key connections to identify how organisational context influences leadership effectiveness which in turn impacts on team members and their engagement.

What “types” of leaders are we encountering?

Four Leadership “types” encountered in 360° feedback debriefs

1

At the Monday team briefing, Harry knew he was in trouble. He also knew that his team knew he was in trouble. Harry felt the tension in the room as each team member went through the motions of providing a progress update and summarising their priorities. At one level, the tone was professional, but the body language in the room indicated a mix of scepticism and hostility.

It was clear that the social media team had stalled; critical projects were way behind schedule and the team was under increasing pressure from key stakeholders. Three months ago each team member would have made suggestions to rethink work processes and offered help to those colleagues facing particular challenges. Now, heads were down as each team member outlined the problems they were experiencing. Harry knew the team blamed him for the current situation. He could find any number of reasons to explain the issues - not least a dysfunctional organisational structure - but he recognised that he was a large part of the problem. He was out of his depth, taking on a level of complexity he wasn't equipped to tackle.

Harry glances at his watch. At 11.30 he has a “catch up” with his manager. Positioned as an informal review, he knows the reality: this is part of his performance appraisal. Harry feels the anxiety building up. What should he say to his manager?

Harry is in a hole and struggling to make a positive impact.

2

Oksana, in a rare moment of reflection, looked back at the last quarter. Regional manager for a mid-market hotel group, she was pleased that her region had performed against financial target. She accepted that a few customer metrics had dipped, and the H.R. stats looked a bit worrying, but overall she was holding her own against her peers. At the next management meeting she knew she wouldn't be the focus of the public humiliation her boss relished.

Oksana also remembered the comment her partner had made last week: “I never see you these days.” It highlighted the reality of 70 hour weeks, long evenings, catching up over weekends, and holidays interrupted by calls. It was an unsustainable life style, and it was now affecting her relationships, not just with her partner, but with her wider family and friends.

Oksana asked herself, “Why am I having to put in so much effort for so little gain? So much input, for what output? Maybe I'm just not that good at this job. What do I need to do to change this work pattern and raise my game?”

Oksana is doing OK but finding it tough.

Four Leadership “types” encountered in 360° feedback debriefs

3

It was while speaking at the Leaders Forum last month that Winona had a moment of insight. Regarded as high potential by her company - a global beverage business - Winona has a glittering track record. Building a reputation as an organisational trouble shooter, she had worked through a series of messy turnarounds, gaining promotion with each success. Now as Operations Director, she has featured in FT profiles and her name mentioned as a potential successor to the CEO, due to retire in two years.

But in her moment of insight Winona asked herself, “Am I really enjoying this?” She was reminded of the question Steve Jobs had posed of John Sculley: “Do you want to sell sugar water for the rest of your life, or do you want to come with me and change the world?” It wasn’t that Winona was unhappy. Far from it. At her last 360° feedback review, the results had been outstanding, an unconditional evaluation from her manager, peers, team and stakeholders. She had been particularly delighted by the comments that indicated the positive impact she was having on her colleagues.

But Winona knew she wasn’t fully engaged in her leadership role, and she sensed that this was going to affect her motivation. In fact she knew that her motivation wasn’t at the same level as last year. “What do I need to do to rediscover my purpose and re-engage?” she asked herself.

Winona is doing well but not flourishing in leadership life.

4

The strategy away day was not going according to plan. “Too many dull PowerPoint presentations”, thought Theo - the Chief Financial Officer of a NHS Foundation Trust - “and not enough hard thinking and challenging debate.”

With a career in one of the blue chip management consultancies, Theo had joined the Trust two years ago, and impressed the executive team with the speed with which he had taken on a difficult set of problems, the legacy of his predecessor. His contribution had restored the reputation of the Trust, performance across a range of indicators had improved, and the mood of the organisation had been transformed.

As he prepared for his slot, Theo announced to the executive team, “I’ve decided to change things a bit. Rather than running through this deck, I thought it might be better if I share a few thoughts about my experience over the last two years and some ideas for the future of the Trust, and we just open up the conversation.”

“Truly inspirational” the CEO said warmly at the end of the discussion. “We really have the beginnings of a blue print for the future, a strategy that focuses priorities and one that will resonate with staff.”

Back home, Theo’s partner asked how the away day had gone. “Very well. You know what? I’m really loving this job.”

Theo is thriving and enjoying making an exceptional impact.

A shifting leadership agenda

These four individuals are of course caricatures, but these scenarios identify key themes we see in the implementation of 360° feedback programmes.

Whilst the majority of leaders are making a positive impact, few are operating at exceptional levels of performance, the kind of performance that achieves the Lollapalooza effect¹ of outstanding business gains. This is obvious, not every leader can be exceptional. But exceptional levels of input - energy and time - now expected of leaders are not being translated into extraordinary levels of outcome.

A significant number of leaders are tired. This isn't just the physical tiredness resulting from long days, a demanding travel schedule and interrupted weekends and holidays, this is also emotional fatigue. For some this results from boredom and losing interest in the challenges they face, and now going through the motions of looking and sounding the part of a leader. For others, emotional fatigue is the exhaustion of taking on too much, and too many competing and contradictory priorities, and feeling little progress is being made.

It is this tiredness that Marshall Goldsmith describes as the loss of “mojo”².

When leaders fail to thrive³ there are organisational consequences. Organisations find themselves:

- on the back foot to manage today rather than on the front foot to shape the future.
- choosing the OK fix that gets by rather than search for the creative solution that optimises.
- running rushed back-to-back meetings that fail to reach conclusions rather than the energising debate that makes and keeps commitments.
- operating within silos rather than collaborating across functions.
- making knee-jerk responses under stress rather than creating the time and space for well informed decision making.
- taking expedient short-cuts to “get it done” that has damaging long-term repercussions⁴.

Organisations need a critical mass of thriving leaders to achieve and sustain success. Without this critical mass, organisations lose their business “mojo” and begin the trajectory of decline.

Thriving in context

We can make further exhortations for personal heroics to ask more of our leaders. And of course every leader can find ways to optimise their effectiveness and impact. But, without an understanding of the specific context in which leaders operate, we make life more difficult than it needs to be. We focus on the extraordinary leaders who manage in the face of adversity, and become increasingly reliant on a smaller number of leaders. Instead, if we find ways to shift the context - from challenging to supportive - we make it easier for all leaders to excel.

The Thrive application incorporates seven themes of context:

- Strategy
- Structure
- Culture
- senior management
- systems and processes
- Communication
- employee maturity

to identify what is helping or hindering leadership performance.

This approach is not one that “explains away” any tough messages in 360° feedback debrief conversations. Rather the Thrive application grounds development planning within the forces that are supporting or blocking leadership performance. Without an insight into this context, goals become vague wishes rather than practical actions that make an impact.

Aggregated, this data also provides an important snapshot into organisational health and the dynamics of a thriving work place.



The drivers of leadership impact

Thrive looks at two levels of impact:

The first level looks at “**bottom line**” impact and how the leader is responding to the expectations of the different feedback groups. This is to see leadership as “the art of juggling” in which effective leaders manage the competing priorities of the line manager, peers, team members and other stakeholders. Each group has a distinctive set of expectations, expectations that reflect their own demands of the individual leader, and have to be managed.

The bottom line questions for a leader are:

- “Do I know what my different colleagues want from me?”
- “Am I delivering against these different expectations?”

This is leadership as delivering the outcomes that meet colleague expectations. Leaders who thrive recognise these different demands and find ways to negotiate and balance the competing trade-offs of these expectations.

The second level focuses on the **Four Cs**⁵ that underpin consistent and sustained success.

Effective leaders:

- project **Credibility** to establish their legitimacy and reassure others of their competence.
- draw on **Capability** to tackle a range of business challenges in a mature and balanced way.
- display **Character** to deal with the tough stuff with integrity, leading with authenticity and operating as role models of professional and ethical standards.
- apply the tactics of **Career Management** to juggle personal ambitions within the demands of organisational life.

There is of course an inter-play across these four themes. Darkside leaders - the toxic leaders who undermine organisational well-being - take the short cut that combines fake Credibility with self-serving Career Management, untrammelled by any consideration of Character. This is “leader-ing”⁶ to exploit others.

Leaders who thrive understand leadership realities:

- why **Credibility** matters and how to establish and maintain it.
- how to play to their **Capability** strengths and draw on others’ talents to mitigate any gaps.
- why **Character** is non-negotiable for purpose and authenticity.
- how to be savvy in **Career Management** to be organised around organisational priorities, personal aspirations and life circumstances.

Leadership engagement to thrive

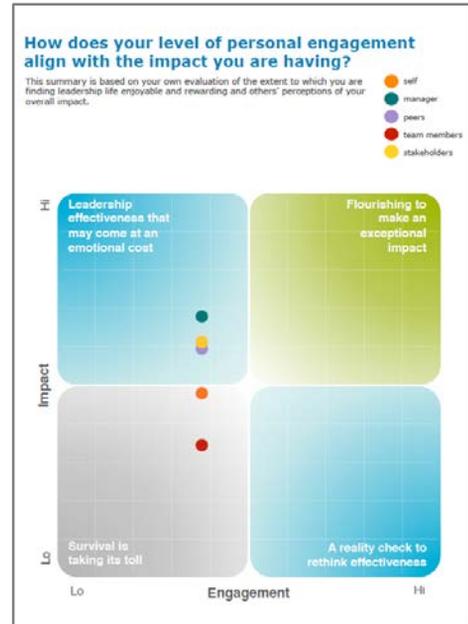
No doubt the “engagement” word is over used, and debate continues about its meaning, the constructs which underpin it, the extent of the disengagement problem, as well as the causal dynamics that drive gains in service responsiveness, productivity and innovation. This discussion will go on⁷. It is clear however that despite the circular discussions, engagement matters and any organisation which doesn’t take the issues of motivation and commitment seriously will face an up hill climb in achieving and sustaining long-term success.

Thrive asks six questions to gain an insight into leadership engagement to capture feelings about pride, purpose and meaning.

Mapping engagement against impact provides an important analysis to shape development planning. Here the conversation cross-references the “outer” world of leadership outcomes and impact with the “inner world” of the leaders’ experience.

Leaders who thrive enjoy the virtuous cycle in which purpose and meaning help make a positive impact that energises and motivates them to take on greater challenges that in turn builds greater effectiveness. These are also the leaders whose pride and purpose creates a positive environment for colleagues that makes it easier for them to perform.

Conversely there is the vicious circle in which leaders spiral down into survival mode. Here low motivation and low impact interact to reinforce the problem and leaders find themselves on a dynamic of decline. As motivation falls, and results dip further, the hole gets bigger.

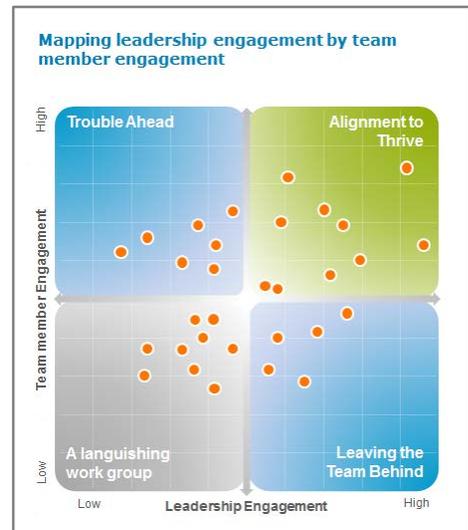


Thrive: report outputs

The Thrive feedback application generates three levels of report output:

- 1. Personal reports** which integrate a high level summary of the key issues and priority themes with a detailed analysis of the specific pattern of feedback from colleagues. Visually engaging, these reports are designed for the end user to go quickly from “what’s the story?” to “what’s next?”
- 2. Talent summaries.** There is the option of a one page analysis that integrates the feedback findings and identifies career opportunities and risks. These summaries become an important part of the information flow for talent and succession reviews.
- 3. Organisational analysis.** For a population of leaders completing Thrive within an organisation, trend analysis generates:

- a **profile of the group’s leadership** strengths, gaps, counter-productive behaviours and risks.
- an **analysis of context** to provide an audit of the factors that are helping or hindering leadership performance within the organisation.
- a review of **leadership engagement levels** to identify the extent to which the group is thriving in leadership life.
- a **team member engagement index** and the consolidation of team member feedback to report back engagement levels and the impact of leadership.



Practical applications of Thrive

In another article⁸ we outlined the 15 risks in the design and implementation of 360° feedback programmes and how to overcome the potential hazards. In summary, organisations achieve performance gains from 360° feedback when relevant content, imaginative design, user-friendly technology are integrated within well executed processes for implementation and follow through.

Thrive is used as part of:

Ad hoc leadership coaching activity for a richer analysis of the challenges facing the leader. The coaching conversation is of course about the individual's leadership approach and impact, but Thrive helps ground the discussion within context. Coaching cross-references leadership effectiveness with the organisational factors that are helping or hindering performance, as well as the distinctive expectations of different colleagues.

Leadership development programmes. The leadership development industry has been on the receiving end of recent challenge⁹. Some of this criticism is over-played, but some make the valid point that leaders do not develop in a vacuum. They develop within a context - a dynamic of strategic, structural, cultural and other factors that are more or less supportive of performance. The interaction between this context and the leader is critical to identifying the specific development priorities that will drive gains in performance. Thrive also provides the opportunity to ensure the "inner world" of leadership is given importance in leadership programmes.

Bespoke design as part of performance and talent management processes. Many organisations are facing survey fatigue, as a series of over-lapping requests are sent out to the workforce. In January, for example, the annual engagement survey goes out. In March there is an audit of organisational culture. And over the summer, a sequence of 360° feedback processes are rolled out. In the autumn, a well-being questionnaire is then sent out, and so on.

For organisations looking for a more integrated and joined-up strategy, Thrive not only reports back at the personal level for individual development planning, the data can be rolled up in a consolidated analysis to evaluate:

- are our leaders thriving to make a positive impact?
- does the organisational context help (or hinder) your leaders to thrive?
- what impact are our leaders having?
- are our leaders engaged in their leadership challenges?
- are employees engaged by our leaders?
- what is the connection between leadership engagement and employee engagement?

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