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The 2nd Annual Year in Ideas

Earth-shattering breakthroughs, eye-popping INNOVATIONS

By Paul Tough

Dad's Performance Review • It's a classic trope of American family life: the high-powered executive with a Type A personality who has no problem juggling billion-dollar deals and conference calls in his corner office, but finds himself at a loss when faced with an unhappy spouse or a troubled child at home. Now there is a tonic for this divided soul, beyond the traditional predinner tumbler of Scotch: a cutting-edge management tool that can be used to heal the wounds of the dysfunctional family.

In April, LeaderWorks, a management-consulting firm based in Monument, Colo., introduced a service called Family360 and began providing personalized family assessments to executives at corporations, including General Motors, Honeywell and DuPont. The idea is based on Management 360, a method of executive evaluation that has been popular in the upper echelons of corporate America for more than a decade. In Management 360, a high-level executive's performance is assessed not just by his boss, but by the people all around

him (as in 360 degrees): colleagues, subordinates, supervisors. The result, in theory, is a more balanced analysis of how the executive functions at work. The founders of LeaderWorks have refitted the 360 concept for the family, at a cost of about \$1,000 per assessment.

The Family360 process starts with the executive's spouse, children and in some cases his parents and siblings filling out a detailed questionnaire in which they evaluate the subject both quantitatively — scoring him from 1 to 7 on, say, how well he “helps create enjoyable family traditions” and “uses a kind voice when speaking” — and qualitatively, listing “three to five positive attributes” and “two things you want this person to do less.” The data are then analyzed by LeaderWorks, and the results are sent to the executive in a “growth summary” report that presents his family's concerns in the form of bar graphs and pie charts and identifies “focus areas” for special attention (“paying attention to personal feelings,” “solving problems without getting angry”).

The next step is for the executive to convene a Family360 Council around the dining-room table, an “upbeat and

constructive” feedback session where the executive expresses “gratitude for everyone's help” and invites the family “to jointly create a Development Plan to strengthen family relationships.” The company also provides an “investment guide” with hundreds of specific actions that let you connect with your family as efficiently as possible: buy a speakerphone for the home so that you can join in on family game night when you're on the road; go for a walk with your child every day, even if it's only to the end of the driveway; create “communication opportunities” while doing the dishes with your spouse or waiting in line with your child at the store.

It is an open question whether the mysterious complexities of family life pondered by Tolstoy and Freud and Updike can really be reduced to the jargon of management theory. But with Family 360, the misunderstood child of the cold father (think James Dean in “Rebel Without a Cause,” crying “You're tearing me apart!” to Jim Backus) is at least able to get through to Dad in a language he can understand: the spiralbound executive summary.