

Reprinted from THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

THURSDAY, JULY 11, 2002

© 2002 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Work & Family / By Sue Shellenbarger

Frisbee, Favoritism and Tears: Scenes From a 'Corporate' Evaluation of Dad

IT WAS performance-review time for Ben Porter, and the feedback was getting rough.

Gathered in a room with seven close associates, he was drawing high marks overall, but there were some stinging criticisms. You're not spending enough time with us and you're too distracted when you do, several people said. One person was so upset by what she saw as favoritism by Mr. Porter that she'd cried.

Oh, and another suggestion: Spend more time playing Frisbee.

Mr. Porter took the feedback even more seriously than usual. The source: His wife, Kerry, and their six children, ages 6 through 21, assembled in their living room.

In an unusual experiment in executive coaching, Mr. Porter was testing 360-degree feedback—a popular on-the-job appraisal tool that involves gathering performance ratings not only from managers, but from peers and subordinates as well—as a tool to improve his performance as a husband and father. It was his daughter Jessica, 11, who cried. “To see the tears in her eyes just killed me,” he says.

Most people find enough to dislike in 360-degree feedback at work. Who would invite this kind of attack-on-all-fronts at home? Mr. Porter, an executive coach with LeaderWorks, a leadership-development firm in Colorado Springs, and Perry Christensen, of WFD Consulting, a human-resources firm in Watertown, Mass., invented the “Family 360” after coaching hundreds of big-company executives pained over their lack of life balance.

“These are guys who have made their money many times over. More times than not, they’ve screwed up on the family side,” Mr. Porter says. The Family 360 aims to jump-start family communication, and improve job performance as

well, by broadening and enriching executives’ lives.

■ Wake-up call: Dean Scarborough, president of Avery Dennison, a maker of adhesive and office products, used the Family 360 and says it was a helpful wake-up call. Feedback is even more powerful when it comes from your family, he says. “It was good, and sobering at the same time.” While his family found much to praise, they want him to be more patient and spend less time travelling. Most painful, he says, was learning that no one in his family feels he gives them enough one-on-one time. He says he’s taking steps to change and he believes it will help him at the office as well. “At the end of the day, the best-balanced people are the best executives,” he says.

Though Mr. Porter, a former executive at Pepsico and Allied Signal, and Mr. Christensen, a former Merck executive, received lots of praise from their families when they tested the Family 360, they also drew fire for too little one-on-one time.

For Mr. Porter, Jessica’s pain was a shock. He loves basketball, and shooting hoops with his boys comes easy. But he had no idea his daughter was feeling left out. Now, he’s setting “date nights” with her, and trying to spend more time with his youngest child, six-year-old David, who wanted him to play more Frisbee and other games.

Scott Porter, 13, called his dad on his habit of working during family vacations, even though he squeezes it in before the rest of the family wakes. “It was a reminder: ‘Porter, you can’t burn the candle at both ends,’” says Mr. Porter, who consults to General Motors and Home Depot, among others. “You’re not fooling anybody.”

■ Taking action: As a result of the family feedback, he’s jettisoning a few other clients to gain home time. “These are big chunks of money I’m saying good-bye to. But I have only a few years before my kids are gone, and there’s no going back.”

At Mr. Christensen’s home, several of his five children faulted him for favoritism when mediating arguments between his daughters Breanne, 13, and Heather, 11. Since the feedback, “I think he got better,” Breanne says approvingly in an interview. Heather agrees; “he’s been more fair,” she says.

The Family 360 is being offered to LeaderWorks clients, with surveys for family members to fill out and coaching on everything from how to do the sessions to ways to solve problems they bring up. So far, executives at one big manufacturing concern have showed interest in trying it, Mr. Porter says. A Web site, www.family360.net, offers information.

■ Should you try it at home?: The Family 360 isn’t for troubled families. It could unearth problems that demand professional help. Many people would probably benefit from supplemental coaching, too, to help keep follow-up talks constructive and upbeat.

But it might not hurt to ponder the process. Merely reporting this column made me more aware of my kids’ perspective. When my son, 11, volunteered that I’d been grouchy lately, my knee-jerk reaction was to defend myself. Instead, I questioned him—then explained I was raising my expectations of him. No problem, he said, but be more positive in communicating that. I changed my tone, for the better.

Too many executives neglect their home lives. And too many parents, me included, are quick to look to experts, and slow to hear signals from our kids, themselves, on how we’re doing. A 1999 book, “Ask the Children” by Ellen Galinsky, surveyed 1,000 children’s views of their parents, and it echoes the message from the Christensen, Porter and Scarborough kids:

You need to spend more focused time with us.