OBJECTIVITY OF SHARED EVALUATIONS OF SALES PRACTICES

Pascal Brassier, PhD, ESC Clermont Graduate School of Mgmt (France)

Erick Leroux, PhD, Paris XIII University CEPN (France)

Pierre Piré-Lechalard, PhD, ESC Clermont Graduate School of Mgmt (France)

Abstract

Evaluation is not a new concept in sales force management. But what is really evaluated? Literature and management practice show us that, on one hand, evaluation is mainly based on sales performance. This is conducted in various ways, which could be interpreted as a lack of a globally accepted evaluation process. On the other hand, the object of the evaluation is essentially the statements of the salespeople under evaluation. The question is therefore: to what extent is sales practice evaluated effectively, and by whom? As a consequence, what could be learned from a shared and co-produced evaluation of observed practices?

This paper intends to, firstly provide an overview of practices of sales force evaluation in the existing literature. Secondly, we focus on 360° evaluation processes, often used in management, rarely in sales force management. The third part of the paper is dedicated to an empirical study, conducted with sales managers and experts, in which the 360° evaluation of sales practices was tested. To conclude, suggestions for further developments, together with research and managerial issues, are provided.

Sales force evaluation is a topic apparently appreciated by researchers. The question of sales performance evaluation lies at the center of a large body of contributions. In the past ten to twelve years alone, from Piercy and al. (1999) to Blocker and al. (2012), many have highlighted, for example, the causes of sales performance, the links between outcome performance and behavioral performance (Piercy and al. 1999), or the impact of client-oriented behaviors on this performance.

It appears, however that two questions receive little attention from researchers:

- Why are *shared evaluations* underused, when it appears that this method may provide a better evaluation?
- Why are evaluations based mainly on sales performance and almost never on *real and observed sales practices*? In other words, why are the effects, and not their causes, evaluated?

This research, as a work in progress and a part of a broader project on organizational sales practices, intends to investigate these elements as a whole: examining the conditions for a *shared evaluation of real sales practices*.

1. Evaluation of sales practices.

1.1 The object of the evaluation: sales practices.

Researchers in sales force management pay much attention to evaluation and control. Since Churchill and al. (1985), the literature has provided managers with important instruments and knowledge essentially regarding the way to evaluate sales performance. But due to this focus on outcomes, the question of the practices, actions and behaviors which generate such performance is probably under-estimated.

Nevertheless, it appears that, in this body of work, the notion of sales performance often includes the notion of practice: on one hand we observe an understanding of sales performance in terms of items of sales outcomes, and on the other hand, the concept of sales behaviors.

In a 'classic' dichotomy, based on the scale developed by Behrmann and Perreault (1982, 1984), two sets of distinct variables, concerning 'behavioral performance' and 'outcome performance', are determinants of sales force effectiveness (Piercy and al. 1999).

As a consequence, managers should be able to develop and evaluate salespeople' behaviors within the context of an organizational understanding of sales effectiveness. The evaluation of sales behaviours and practices would then be based on factors that could be controlled by salespeople themselves.

If the concept of 'behavioral performance' is probably closer to the notion of practice, it covers a wide range of elements. Nowadays it includes ever more tasks, in a context of complexity and knowledge management. Expertise is required regarding technical skills, adaptative selling methods, the ability to work as sales teams, to master sales presentations, personal organization, administrative tasks, etc. Generally speaking, today's salespeople must now be very proactive, as this attitude is recognized as influencing sales performance (Pitt and al. 2002).

The concept of 'sales practice' has to be clearly defined, therefore. It is only after this definition that we may hope for a rigorous evaluation process of effective sales practices. Practitioners define a practice as *the way someone behaves in general in a given situation*. And a behavioral competence is *how someone activates his/her practices to obtain a given result*.

The concept of sales practice can be understood as a *set of acts and tasks (daily action) and activities (global action) performed by a salesperson*.

We could also talk about competencies, which is a broader idea than the practice itself. We can define competencies as the “repertoires of behaviours” necessary for a specific position and role (Lévy-Leboyer 1996, Brasseur and al., 2011). Mastering and developing one’s competencies depends deeply on the person him/herself as much as on the context in which he/she works (Defélix et al., 2006).

This question of practice, and not only of performance, can be directly related to a recent critical observation: scholars and managers should focus more, as a key instrument, on “salesperson activities” and “sales management activities” (Dixon and Tanner 2012, p.11). One of the most constantly addressed ideas is that sales management could act to improve salespersons’ practices, in order to ultimately obtain better performances.
But practicing specific tasks and actions, or having an expertise regarding them, is not a goal in itself. Salespeople’ practices are particularly important for sales force managers because they are known to be effectiveness drivers (Zoltners and al. 2008). This is why there is a real value in revisiting sales performance drivers.

Several years ago, Walker and al. (1977) and Churchill and al. (1985) produced what can now be considered a core reference in terms of classification. They include the knowledge possessed and used. Here we find micro and macro selling skills: communication and presentation skills, adaptive selling and presentation expertise, product/technical and customer knowledge (Verbeke and al. 2011). But these are understood as a set of knowledge and know-how possessed in theory by a salesperson, not necessarily demonstrated and observed at a good/excellent level in practice.

Modern selling now deserves to be viewed as a complex process of value co-creation, both at inter-individual and inter-organizational levels (Dixon and Tanner 2012). The focus has more than ever to be on interactions and acts, on practices and the value they generate, and on associated weaknesses and difficulties subject to improvement.

We can agree that acts and practices determine, to a large extent, individual sales performance, shared sales force performance , and the ability to establish stable organizational success through collective value creation. Next, we must define the effective evaluation processes of such practices.

1.2 The evaluation process.

The idea that a managerial model of sales force control should be based on salespeople’s behaviours (Anderson and Oliver 1987), including evaluation, is not new. The level of expertise in a set of sales competencies is recognized as essential for professional success, in particular for industrial sales forces operating in a complex context. It totally justifies devoting considerable managerial efforts to fine-tuning evaluation, training and skills development. This is related to one role of sales managers: that of supervision, evaluation and control, both on outcomes and on behaviours, more or less formally (Krafft and al. 2012).

To achieve such a goal, one subjective evaluation made only by the field manager is not sufficient. Whilst this probably has some significance, its impact on outcomes is tenuous (Pitt and al. 2002). In addition, we notice a lack of consensus regarding the type of sales performance measurement used by sales managers. There is disagreement regarding the 'best' way to measure performance. But multi-evaluation appears to be better: the manager's evaluation and self-evaluation are often compared, even if this comparison is mainly based on outcomes, whether objective (company data collection) or subjective (post-analysis based on perception) (Chonko and al. 2000). Sometimes literature and practice also use evaluations provided by clients, regarding the way in which salespeople interact with them. A recent example analyzes client perceptions of sales representatives' service behaviours (Amyx and Bhuian 2009).

Nevertheless, since Churchill and al. (1985), we know that these instruments could suffer from identified biases: there is much subjective evaluation of sales performance. Jaramillo and his colleagues in particular have built a body of knowledge showing how effective performance impacts managers' and salespersons' evaluations (2003, 2004, 2005).

They question to what extent self-reports and managerial reports of salespeople's performance should be taken as seriously as objective measurement. Over- and under-evaluation are observed.

The authors study the influence of subjective and objective evaluation of performance on such variations (2004). They shed light on how salespeople and their managers evaluate performance, based on their discourse: "how I believe I act, and how I report this analysis," for a salesperson; "how my sales reps act, in my perception," from the manager's point of view.

Self-reports are visibly inaccurate: over-estimated by low performers, under-estimated by the best performers, to a lesser degree. Some aspects of the evaluation are differently weighted, depending on the performance of the salesperson concerned.

These findings raise a very important element: irrespective of the instrument used for evaluating salespeople's practices, some significant biases should be taken into account, impacting the evaluation finally attributed to a given action and/or outcome.

This may add an element of complexity to the current role of sales managers. This includes structuring and clarifying salespeople's role, and as a consequence clarifying practices and actions required from them (Ingram 2005). Managers' added value could then consist in their ability to distinguish objective factors from perceptual information, which may become biased in a situation of increased complexity. But in that context, more than ever, role perceptions and applied skills at a certain level are determinants of performance.

Such leadership emphasizes the value of evaluation: sales managers have to precisely detect deficiencies in practices, and help their teams to address them. Salespeople themselves must deal with "increasing task difficulty" and "task overload". Evaluation can be viewed as a way to empower salespeople, a task highlighted by their implication in a shared evaluation process. This kind of internal collaboration, concretized by the evaluation process, criteria and consequences, constitutes a positive aspect of a "learning sales organization."

Finally, our assumptions are the following in this research project:

- *Sales practices are a strategic topic, both for individual and organizational understanding of sales performance, in a context of complex situations and the knowledge economy;*
- *Salespeople's evaluation has to be shared in order to obtain a set of robust data, reflecting the reality of what is done to generate sustainable sales performance;*
- *Because a generalized approach to sales evaluation is not yet in place, certain experiments can contribute interesting knowledge on how such evaluations could be conducted.*

It's important to notice that we don't define hypotheses, in the positivist understanding. This work follows a constructivist approach. One of its objectives is to bring some theoretical findings about practices appraisal in complex situations, through shared evaluations.

The following case demonstrates a way of applying an instrument for shared evaluation: the *360° Feedback Evaluation Instrument* (360 FEI).

2. The 360° Feedback Evaluation Instrument (360 FEI).

2.1 Concept and principles.

If, in the past, evaluation was synonymous with control and sanction, it is now one of the improvement instruments that any manager should possess (Handy et al. 1996).
360 FEI has been defined as a set of evaluation records coming from two or more referrals, and concerning one actor in the firm. This set of evaluators may include supervisors, peers, subordinates, internal and/or external clients, salespeople and suppliers (from Dalessio, 1998, p. 278). Since 1990, more than 100 scholars and practitioners have contributed to research on shared retroactive evaluation.
95% of Fortune 1000 companies use a form of multisource evaluation (Atwater et Waldman, 1998). Irrespective of the popularity and interest of 360 FEI, it is necessary to clarify what this type of evaluation is. Problems in application and interpretation often arise from misconception or errors in implementation.

In the sales force context, the 360 FEI approach to evaluating salespeople may provide several benefits:

- It reveals weaknesses in the skills possessed, and helps to address them in order to generate better performance;

- It is a proactive way to encourage the improvement of competencies and the achievement of objectives;
- It is a process included in a knowledge management system;
- It is client-orientated, highlighting his/her point of view and needs;
- It adopts a wide vision of the sources of performance

The implementation of such a process has its constraints. It implies cost in terms of budget and time spent by evaluators including the salesperson him/herself. In terms of outcomes, it could also be subjective, displaying an over- or under-estimation bias, as already mentioned for evaluations in general. Last but not least, it may generate some tension between the salesperson and his/her evaluators (Vinson, 1996).

When it has been used in sales forces, the 360 FEI has helped salespeople who received constructive feedback to improve their behaviours and practices, and they have shown a positive perception of their evaluators (McEvoy et Buller, 1987). Several explanations can support this observation: introducing a 360 FEI process helps salespeople to consciously analyze and use their techniques and observe their impact on the achievement of objectives (Smither et al, 1995). In addition, the larger the gap between someone’s feedback and performance norms, the more he/she is motivated to change his/her behaviour.

This may be related to the fact that salespeople have a deep desire to be positively compared to their peers, and want to act when the comparison fails to meet their expectations. Johnson and Ferstl (1999) have already shown that employees who receive lower feedback scores than their self-assessment are particularly interested in closing this perceived gap.

In other words, recognizing the importance of the 360 FEI process means taking into consideration gaps between existing individual performance and norms, and linking this performance to a strategic and collective appreciation.

The 360 FEI process itself can be applied with various ways. Tornow (1993) identifies four of them:

- *For individual development*: to help individuals to be conscious of the differences between ‘how they see themselves’ and ‘how they are perceived by close partners’, highlighting the main weaknesses;
- *For professional evaluation*: with several categories of evaluators involved, from hierarchy to colleagues and other partners;
- *For salespeople selection*: it is a way to collect systematic data about potential candidates, and predict their potential fit with the job;
- *For organizational management*: the instrument helps to analyze and share perceptions and/or observation on existing skills, and to align for example leadership behaviours on the company strategy.

The cultural context in each organization is another major factor in implementing a 360 FEI process. It has to be carefully prepared, as noticed by Atwater and Waldman (1998): it is a proactive process in which employees have to participate for their own positive improvement. Some conditions are required (Moravec and al. 1993):

- Is the organizational culture linked to its success through learning and change processes?
- Are employees free to express themselves without any negative consequences?
- Do they accept to openly communicate and change in order to actively participate to the organizational performance?
- Do managers (top managers in particular) integrate what they learn, and prepare to change anything required?
- Do they exchange on outcomes and their factors with employees? Etc.

Some of these dimensions have been used in the 360 FEI approach. But research shows important variations among the elements evaluated: leadership, communication skills, self organization, professional knowledge, conflict management, human development, coaching and support, quality delivered to clients, etc. (Antonioni 1994; Johnson and Ferstl 1999; Mount and al. 1998; Smither and al. 1995; Walker and Smither 1999). What type of information should be collected and used in a 360 FEI? The fact that several sources provide such data (supervisor, colleagues, clients, etc.) should help to triangulate and verify their validity. But each of them can only observe a part of the total set of sales practices. The manager's role could be focused on their aggregation and verification (Bernardin and al. 1993).

Finally, most researches have chosen to combine all the dimensions evaluated for one purpose, the measurement of salespeople's performance. One of the risks of that orientation is that of a halo effect, by which evaluators and the salesperson may be overly focused, even unconsciously, on the explanation of the performance, high or low. Taking into account all these interests and limits, one company specialized in sales team management and training has developed its own 360 FEI over the years, the so-called '4LS'.

2.2 The 4LS evaluation instrument and its application in sales forces

Presentation of the 4LS instrument.
4LS is built on a 360 degree evaluation methodology. It allows evaluators to assess the practices applied by an actor in his/her professional environment. 4LS was created by Krauthammer International, a consultancy and training company specialized in sales and sales management.

The instrument was developed to "calibrate professional practices" in management and sales, as a unique "frame of reference of observable behaviours". It is described in the same way for everybody, evaluators or salespeople evaluated. It potentially answers one criticism regarding performance evaluation questionnaires, since behaviours are interpreted and evaluated on the way they are visible and observed, not as assumptions of "how they should be".

The instrument lists behavioural skills as ordinal items, divided into two groups. The first represents fundamental skills, the second, applied skills:

Table 1: The 4LS instrument, 10 variables and 38 items.

Salespeople's Fundamental skills, 4 variables (12 items)	Salespeople's Applied Skills, 6 variables (26 items)
• Self-demandingness (2 items) • Questioning oneself (3) • Interpersonal communication (4) • Self- control (3)	• Prospecting (5) • Diagnosing (5) • Persuading (5) • Negotiating (6) • Closing (2) • Developing loyalty (3)

The scale used in the instrument is not an evaluation on a Likert Scale of 5 or 7 points; rather, it is a scale proposing 4 levels of expertise (Krauthammer 2010): (1) Disqualifying, (2) Penalizing, (3) Operational, and (4) Exemplary.

For example, for the item "prospecting over the phone" in the variable "prospecting", the observable behaviours are:

Table 2: The four levels of evaluation.

1. Disqualifying: *Shows no discipline, relies on intuition*
2. Penalizing: *Prospects sporadically, when forced to (results, hierarchy, etc.)*
3. Operational: *Sets time slots for regular prospecting*
4. Exemplary: *Constantly sets a pace and a minimum number of calls*

This methodology is a way to avoid personal judgments, based by nature on subjective value scales. The goal is only to identify, among four levels of practice, the most frequently-observed. The results should then be further explained, and should facilitate a personalized action plan.

Behavioural skills and practices are expressed using arithmetical methods. Evaluators' answers represent an average indicator of the most frequent behaviour, not the level of practice by itself. As an example, a practice evaluated '3' with 50% of answers at '2' and 50% of '4' cannot be assimilated to another one which has 100% of '3'. These means are represented with different colors in the results report:

Table 3: Representation of the four levels of evaluation.

BLUE	Level ❹, Exemplary	Mean ≥ 3,5
GREEN	Level ❸, Operational	3 ≤ mean < 3,5
ORANGE	Level ❷, Penalizing	2 ≤ mean < 3
RED	Level ❶, Disqualifying	1 ≤ mean < 2

2.3 An empirical survey: key findings.

Univariate analysis

A database of more than 3,600 salespeople evaluated was available for this research.

Table 4: Population by hierarchical ranking.

Hierarchical position					
		Population	%	Valid %	Total %
Valid	1,00 (Salesperson)	579	15,9	16,0	16,0
	2,00 (Manager)	540	14,8	14,9	31,0
	3,00 (Client)	760	20,9	21,0	52,0
	4,00 (Colleague)	1735	47,7	48,0	100,0
	Total	3614	99,4	100,0	
Missing	Missing system	23	,6		
Total		3637	100,0		

These first figures indicate that a salesperson is on average evaluated by one manager, one client and three colleagues, due to the proportions of participants. In theory, it offers a good understanding of a potential 360 degree evaluation.

But the database shows that some salespeople have more evaluators than others: some of them have, for example, only their supervisor, whereas others are evaluated by several clients, or by a top manager. This calls for further analysis: to determine whether the number of evaluators and their status (manager, colleague or client) influences the result of the evaluation.

Some research show, for example, that the number and the quality of appraisers have got an effect on the effectiveness of the process (Antonioni 1996). It could even be an important mistake if “key stakeholders” are not involved in the process (Wimer and Nowak 1998).

10 to 50 % of responses constitute missing values for all except four items. All the evaluators cannot fully evaluate the participant, therefore. Among the four levels of expertise, ‘level 1’ is least-used (less than 2% of responses).

This could be related to several reasons: for example, the over-estimation of the evaluators, including the salesperson, which indicates that it is pretty hard to estimate when a skill is not possessed. It may also be due to objective situations: no-one has a disqualifying level, from beginners to senior practitioners, even those who need to be trained.

‘Level 2 is the second-least used (less than 11% of answers) except for 3 items:

Table 5: Items over-evaluated for the level 2.

“Saying NO to a request” (variable “persuading’)	21,9%
“Discipline applied to him/herself when prospecting over the phone” (variable “prospecting”)	19,1%
“Reaction to a criticism or aggressive remark” (variable “self-control”)	14,5%

At this stage, we cannot identify a correlation between these items, or with certain characteristics of the interviewees. Thus, an independent chi -square test shows that 34 items among 38 are not correlated with the evaluator grade level (chi-square value 17,667; degrees of freedom 12).

As a consequence, we cannot consider that this instrument provides significant differences among the groups of evaluators: salespeople, managers, peers or clients. Before a deeper analysis, we may imagine two hypotheses:

- *The consistency of the instrument provides a set of equivalent evaluations for almost all the practices observed,*
- *Or the opposite, the instrument fails to provide a significant correlation on existing differences of evaluations.*

This could be contradictory with Jamarillo and al. (2005): it is not certain that managers under-evaluate their salespeople’ practices, or that salespeople over-evaluate their own behaviour.
But with a more detailed examination of the database structure, we identified a bias which could offer more understanding of the 360 degrees applied in practice.

The 360 degree vision
It seems difficult, even on a large sample of sales forces like this one, to apply a real 360 degree approach: each of the salespeople should be evaluated by at least one manager, one or two peers and one client. It is not the case. A re-organization of the database is therefore necessary, in order to distinguish between four situations:

- *90° Evaluation*: the context of self-evaluation only,
- *180° Evaluation*: the context of self-evaluation plus that of the manager
- *270° Evaluation*: the context of self-evaluation plus that of the manager and at least one client,
- *360° Evaluation*: the context of total evaluation, including that of the manager, client(s) and peer(s).

As a work in progress, the whole database of more than 3,600 people is still undergoing re-organization. But a first trial shows that, with a high and significant Chi-square result, the evaluation between these four contexts is different.
Without showing the analysis for the 38 items, which all support this result, the item "Saying NO to a request" illustrates the point:

Table 6: Chi-square analysis of the four contexts, item 'SNTAR'.

Chi-Square Test	Value	Degrees freedom	Asymptotic signification (bilateral)
Chi-Square	54,281	12	,000
Likelihood	51,660	12	,000
Observations	3251		

The partial results tend to indicate higher[1] average evaluation scores when the clients participate than yielded by self-evaluation. When colleagues and managers participate, we obtain a lower average evaluation result.

A bivariate analysis of the data provides further clarification. Managers evaluate more negatively than other evaluators.

Table 7: Evaluation by type of individual in means.

	Negative (1 and 2)	***Positive (3 and 4)***
Clients	6,66 %	44,70%
Managers	11,52%	33,40%
Peers	7,25%	40,30%
Self	6,61%	42,47%

In other words, even if the instrument has been built with the intention of avoiding subjective judgments, it seems difficult to obtain completely objective evaluations. One reason could lie in the definition of the 4LS tool: to evaluate "among four levels of practice, the most frequently observed". It is then an appeal to memory and creates an "average" recollection of various and partial observations.

[1] The complete database and its results will be presented for the conference.

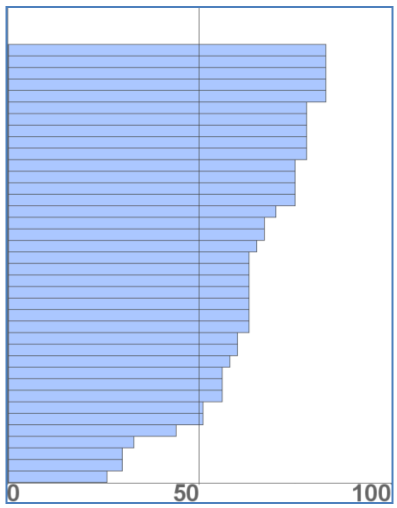
Are the evaluations homogeneous?

We can make a comparison of the evaluations in order to show their homogeneity or heterogeneity, even if there is no valid correlation analysis. We can calculate homogeneity as follows:

$$H = 1 - (\sigma / 2)$$

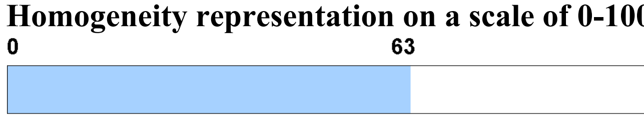
Where σ is the standard deviation between evaluators' answers, for each salesperson. 100 indicates a total homogeneity, 0 indicates a total heterogeneity, as illustrated in this example:

Figure 1: Homogeneity measurement, salesperson N.



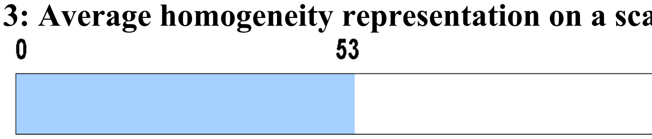
Average results for the salesperson N:

Figure 2: Homogeneity representation on a scale of 0-100, example N.



The whole database shows a low homogeneity:

Figure 3: Average homogeneity representation on a scale of 0-100.



These results demonstrate that the 4LS instrument does not provide a homogeneous evaluation of the salespeople's practice. This calls into question the lucidity of the evaluators, and/or their objectivity.

The univariate analysis suggests that all the participants have difficulties considering the evaluated salesperson as "disqualified" or even "penalizing", as viewed previously. The following table presents an example on one item.

Table 8: Evaluations by grade, item "Negotiating facing several people".

			Negotiating facing several people				Total
			Disqualifying	Penalizing	Operational	Exemplary	
Grade	Client	Population	1	20	205	165	391
		% in grade	0,3%	5,1%	***52,4%***	***42,2%***	
		% total	0,0%	0,7%	7,1%	5,7%	13,5%
	N+	Population	6	79	378	188	651
		% in grade	0,9%	12,1%	***58,1%***	***28,9%***	
		% total	0,2%	2,7%	13,0%	6,5%	22,4%
	Peers	Population	0	98	693	494	1285
		% in grade	0,0%	7,6%	***53,9%***	***38,4%***	
		% total	0,0%	3,4%	23,9%	17,0%	44,3%
	Self	Population	1	31	269	254	555
		% in grade	0,2%	5,6%	***48,5%***	***45,8%***	
		% total	0,0%	1,1%	9,3%	8,8%	19,1%
	Total	Population	8	228	1561	1105	2902
		% in grade	0,3%	7,9%	***53,8%***	***38,1%***	
		% total	0,3%	7,9%	53,8%	38,1%	

It would be unrealistic to consider that all salespeople should be good or excellent in their practice. The source could come from the strongly negative definition and titles of the "disqualifying" and "penalizing" levels: "The participant *ignores* his/her environment, *damages* the relationship and *prevents* performance". This is a type of value judgment.

Conclusion

As a shared evaluation, an instrument such as the 4LS provides an opportunity to obtain several evaluations of a sales practice, conducted by professionals exploring this behaviour. But evaluating observable behaviours, without any subjectivity, from several points of view, seems particularly difficult.

On one hand, this is a reflexive instrument. It uses memory feedback, albeit as objective and as shared as possible. Then it may retain some differences in evaluations regarding the same person. This is one aspect of the 4LS that we wanted to verify.
On the other hand, this work in progress does not include global multivariate analysis or correlation models. The database still needs to be purified, and the hypothesis refined. But several interesting points emerged during the first analysis of this large database: the instrument partially applied a 360° vision. And the evaluations display limited homogeneity.

Among other future developments of the tool and deeper analysis of the current data, we will question the capacity of evaluators to evaluate on more than 3 levels and on a large number of items. We will group observations of both negative criteria, in order to balance their weight, and to see if the "operating" level should help if it is the neutral point. An observed practice deserves to stay as neutral as possible to avoid subjectivity.

Even if 360 degree evaluation tools offer many positive aspects, with a rich literature, we observe the lack of practical and effective instruments. An overview of the existing research and an empirical case on a large international scale show all the interest of the 4LS approach. But it also reveals its limits, and the need to more rigorously improve the instrument in the interests of both practitioners and researchers.

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