



LARRY E. GREINER

ELIZABETH COLLINS

A Day in the Life of Alex Sander: Driving in the Fast Lane at Landon Care Products

5:25 A.M.

Sweat dripped onto the handlebars of Alex Sander's StairMaster. Sander was half an hour into a cardiovascular workout, while carrying on a conversation in the fitness center of the downtown condominium complex with a neighbor who was climbing steadily on his own StairMaster. At 32, Alex was the newest, and youngest, product manager in the Toiletries Division of Landon Care Products, Inc., a cosmetics products company headquartered in Connecticut. In just over one year with Landon, Alex had successfully rebranded two national skin care products. In January 2007, Landon had been acquired by Avant-Garde, a multibillion-dollar European beauty company.

Alex: I'm getting my first 360° performance review today from my boss, Sam Glass. But I don't have the time to waste on this exercise. I need every second to focus on my new *Nourish* product launch, the most challenging marketing assignment I've had so far. Avant-Garde sees Landon as their ticket to market share in the United States. But everyone in Landon's Marketing Department is being 360'd this month, since the vice president of Avant-Garde's Consumer Products Division started pushing for them.

Neighbor: I've heard of 360's, but the biotechnology firm where I work sticks to a traditional review system. How do they actually play out?

Alex: It's basically a feedback tool. You get input from supervisors, peers, direct reports, even customers—that's why it's called a 360°. Feedback from everybody, not just your boss.

I'd bet you my last dollar I know exactly what Sam will tell me. I'll hear the jazz about my style and my temper—360's should be anonymous, but I know who Sam asked for input about me. I have no excuses—Sam hired me to shake up the product team and launch products quickly. On my first day, he said he knew I'd make waves and that was OK with him.

Neighbor: So what IS your style at work?

Professor Larry E. Greiner, University of Southern California, and Elizabeth Collins prepared this case solely as a basis for class discussion and not as an endorsement, a source of primary data, or an illustration of effective or ineffective management.

This case, though based on real events, is fictionalized, and any resemblance to actual persons or entities is coincidental. There are occasional references to actual companies in the narration.

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Alex: If I trust someone to get something done, I'll just check in and say, "How's it coming—can I help?" But if someone isn't happy with the assignment I've given him, or I sense that he's not sure of himself, then I'll push him to find out what he's thinking.

I came to Landon not knowing anything about packaging, manufacturing, or sales promotion. I had to plunge in and make a lot of snap decisions in these areas. Looking back, I can see one poor strategy decision, but on the whole my judgment has been right on target. And if being pushy and commanding is the only way to get the job done—to get two new products out in one year—then it's worth it to me. Even if I have to steamroll over someone's feelings, or ignore the way a colleague would like to handle a project.

Neighbor: I remember you mentioning some sparks with your assistant when you first started at Landon.

Sander: Well, I get ticked off pretty easily. For example, I can't stand explaining something more than a couple of times. But what really bothers me is lack of commitment—for example, if a long-time employee isn't willing to put in extra hours to meet an important deadline. But you know what? After I really become angry, there are people at Landon whose output will jump for at least a couple of weeks afterwards. My temper is actually an effective management tool.

9:00 A.M.

"This is all you've produced in 40 hours of time? Are you kidding me?" Sander's voice reverberated down the hallway. Hansen Leong, Alex's assistant, rolled his eyes as he paused outside Sander's office door. Leong felt sorry for the ashen-faced Betsy Garrison, the marketing department's senior sales analyst, sitting opposite Sander at the round worktable in Sander's office, shoulders hunched. He did not want to further embarrass Garrison, a 20-year veteran of the company, by interrupting; still, he needed to talk to Sander.

As Leong dawdled, Sander turned to Garrison. "Listen, it will take me more time to explain this to you than do it myself. I'm going to take this project off your plate so you can focus on other things." Seeing Leong in the doorway, Sander motioned him to come in.

Leong nodded apologetically to Garrison as she left and said, "The interviewer from your alumni magazine is here." The magazine was interviewing Sander for an article on "high-potential" product managers as part of a career development issue. After the Avant-Garde acquisition of Landon, Sander had been selected to reformulate a stale Avant-Garde skin care product marketed primarily in Western Europe and to launch it as *Nourish* in the United States. The target market for *Nourish* included active American women in their 20s and 30s. Even though considerable investment in research and development would be required, Avant-Garde had allocated \$25 million to fast-track the project, in an effort to beat a competing product to market.

The interviewer from the alumni magazine first asked, "Alex, how did you end up working in product management at Landon?" Sander answered:

After I graduated from business school, I worked at an ad agency in Chicago (see **Exhibit 1** for Sander's resume). As an account executive, I never felt I was developing a finished product. An account executive represents the agency to the client and shows someone else's copy, art, and so on. But you're never in charge of your own creation. That's the main reason I accepted a job at Landon.

Landon is a pretty small shop, and I've been involved in every detail of my product launches. I've really enjoyed the strategy piece—gathering data about market share, figuring out the most profitable positioning for my brands. As a product manager, you have to talk to R&D, then work with market research to see whether you have a feasible idea that will attract consumers. Then you work with advertising. You partner with all the departments to synchronize the program's details. A product manager must ensure a targeted, quality product, whose distinctive features will be clear to the target consumer. Then you have to make the product right and get it to market.

There are a massive number of details in this job, and huge downstream implications if you miss something. For example, ordering certain parts on the production line for containers takes five months' lead time.

At that moment, Sander's BlackBerry buzzed and, with a quick apology, Alex picked up the call. "I need to get a piece of data from this market researcher before my team meeting this afternoon," Sander explained.

While waiting for Sander to finish, the interviewer glanced around Alex's office. It was large for so new a product manager, and the interviewer noted the award plaques on the credenza behind Sander's desk.

Sander finished the brief phone call, and the two continued talking. For the last question, the interviewer asked, "Alex, in your opinion, which type of person is best suited to being a product manager? What final insights would you share with alumni interested in this line of work?" Sander concluded, "An effective product manager has a broad professional background and varied skill set. Your gut instinct guides when you take action and how you make decisions. You depend on the output of the ad agency and sales force—so you have to keep them moving along. You're a highly alert coach who tries to prevent conflicts in the product development process, yet shows interest in what everyone is doing. Product managers can be rather controlling—but I'm not sure that's absolutely essential."

10:30 A.M.

Sander met Sam Glass in Sam's office for the first of several conversations about the 360° performance review. Glass was one of three product group supervisors in the Toiletries Division of Landon Care Products (see **Exhibit 2** for an organization chart).

Glass got right to the point. "Look, I know your views on the feedback process we've gone through for the last month. I know you—and a lot of other people in the division—are not clear on how the feedback will be used. Is the 360° feedback to help with development or is it a performance appraisal? And because of that, you've made it perfectly clear that you think the feedback will be less than honest or tainted in some way."

Sander responded. "You're right. But at the same time, this process doesn't really concern me. I've never worried about promotions because I've always gotten them. As long as I have a degree of success in my job, I'm not worried if I'm going to go up or sideways. Frankly, I haven't plotted my next step here in the company. I've seriously thought of going into field sales, because I lack that exposure. In terms of money, for me it's primarily a measure of how you're doing. I've always made the same amount or more money than my peers. I expect it and demand that level of compensation."

"Compensation is a measure of performance, of course," responded Glass, "but not the only measure. This is the first time we have attempted a 360° review at Landon, so it's natural that we may

need to fine-tune the implementation process—and the goals of the program—in our department next year. But there are themes in this feedback that ring very true. I want you to look seriously at this data—however flawed—and think about how you are going to use it. What are the low-hanging fruit? And what long-term lessons can you draw?"

Glass continued: "For example, the feedback highlights a contradiction in what you are saying and doing. You lobbied for a challenging, highly visible leadership position with *Nourish*, which you won. You have talked to me about gaining a deeper, strategic understanding of the business and the opportunities that the Avant-Garde acquisition presents to you."

Glass was referring to a conversation the previous week in which Sander had shared an interest in "getting into broader planning areas, thinking about the broader implications for the division." Alex had described a personal project: learning how the division's products were formulated and building on that knowledge to understand the global beauty market as well as the relative importance of the U.S. market.

"You want influence over strategic decisions," Glass said, "even though you are younger than every other product manager at Landon. To do that, you must prove yourself as a motivator and leader. You must learn how to get work done through other people. You won't always be able to do everything yourself—not even close. And that means you are going to have to value performance measures other than compensation for individual effort. Your peers respect you, but I doubt many would see you as a leader."

Glass concluded, "I'm going to read these feedback forms again tonight. I suggest you study them in detail yourself. Let's meet again tomorrow morning to discuss what to do on the basis of this feedback." Sander, taking the packet of feedback forms from Glass, grudgingly agreed.

2:00 P.M.

Alex walked into the conference room where the four Connecticut-based U.S. members of the *Nourish* team were gathered for the weekly team meeting. Before Alex arrived, all four had been grumbling about the demands of the project. Since the project kickoff, they had become accustomed to receiving a flurry of emails and phone calls from Sander, outlining in excruciating detail the tasks that they needed to complete. Many of the emails had been sent at 3 A.M. or 4 A.M., Eastern Standard Time, leading team members to wonder about the work pace that Sander would set for the coming year.

Sander initiated the call to the conference bridge, where 12 virtual team members from France, England, Germany, and Japan were waiting. Sander asked Denis Henri, the French marketing lead for the brand from the Avant-Garde side, to outline his group's progress. Alex listened attentively, nodding: Henri had done exactly what he and Sander had discussed the previous week. Sander then spent the next hour expanding on the brand's market strategy for winning market share from competitors, while drawing on exhaustive data recalled from memory.

At the end of the meeting, Sander assigned a daunting list of action items to every team member. When one of the German team members raised the issue of other commitments, Sander reiterated the aggressive timeline for the project. "Everyone needs to pull their weight," said Sander. "I have a longer list of action items than anyone, and I will finish mine early. I challenge you to do the same."

9:00 P.M.

Exercising again on a StairMaster in the fitness center at home, Sander was about to open Glass's feedback packet, when the neighbor from the biotechnology firm walked by. "Hey, Alex, how did your performance review go today?" he asked. Sander responded, "The conversation today just reconfirmed what I've been thinking for a while. It's clear that I can take one of two career paths. Either I'll stay in a managerial track at a large place like Landon, with the responsibility to mentor my staff and build a productive team that fits with the company culture, or my other choice is to become owner in a small start-up, where I can really have some say. But whatever I do, whatever business I'm in, I will master it. I'll spend all my waking hours learning all aspects of the business. In the short term, though, I need to figure out how to handle Sam and this 360° feedback process. This still seems like a waste of time to me—I'm not going to read anything in this packet that I don't know already." (See **Exhibit 3**.)

Staying late in his office, Glass was reviewing Alex's situation with another, more senior, product group supervisor. Glass mused, "Alex makes waves, but that's the price you pay for having such a star. I made the decision to hire knowing there would be waves. Alex never wears out. In many ways, I have to admit, I'm a bit intimidated. Nevertheless, I have a very high personal interest in keeping Alex at Landon."

Glass's colleague commented: "Sam, you might think about the challenge at two levels. What do you as a manager need to do to channel Alex's talent and ensure success, for your product group, and for Alex as an individual? Furthermore, given your particular situations, are there any recommendations you can make to company executives to improve the 360° process next year and to help Landon develop leadership talent long-term?"

Exhibit 1 Alex Sander's Work and Educational Experience

Work Experience	<p>Landon Care Products, Toiletries Division—April 2005 to present. Product manager. Responsible for the rebranding of two nationally known skin care products in 2005-2006; currently the product manager for the U.S. launch of <i>Nourish</i> (Avant-Garde product).</p> <p>Barnhill and Cooper Advertising Agency—July 2001 to March 2005. February 2004–March 2005. Senior account executive for toiletries, swimwear, and sports equipment accounts, including Landon Care Products. Responsible for planning and executing plans in marketing, advertising, promotion, and collateral areas.</p> <p>June 2001 to February 2003. Account executive, rental car account. Responsible for the planning and executing of all sales promotion materials, also for development of Barnhill and Cooper's segmented approach to the special travel markets (weddings, colleges, seniors).</p> <p>July 2000 to June 2001. Executive trainee. Trained in research, traffic, media, and marketing departments. Program included six months of sales experience with client. Accounts included magazines, automotive, and furnishings.</p>
Educational Experience	<p>MIT Sloan, MBA, September 1998–June 2001 Active in MIT Entrepreneurs Club.</p> <p>Stanford University, September 1995–May 1998. BA in Economics. Pursued several entrepreneurial ventures while in college to pay school bills.</p> <p>Summers of 1996, 1997, 1998: Held summer research positions in the Stanford Economics Department, funded through professors' grants. Rock climbing in the Sierra Nevada mountains.</p> <p>University of San Francisco, September 1993–December 1993. Dropped out after a few months and backpacked through Asia.</p> <p>Alta Vista High School, Palo Alto, California. Fashioned several mountaineering tools customized for specific types of climbing challenges in California and Mexico.</p>

Exhibit 2 Organizational Chart of the Marketing Division, Landon Care Products, December 2006

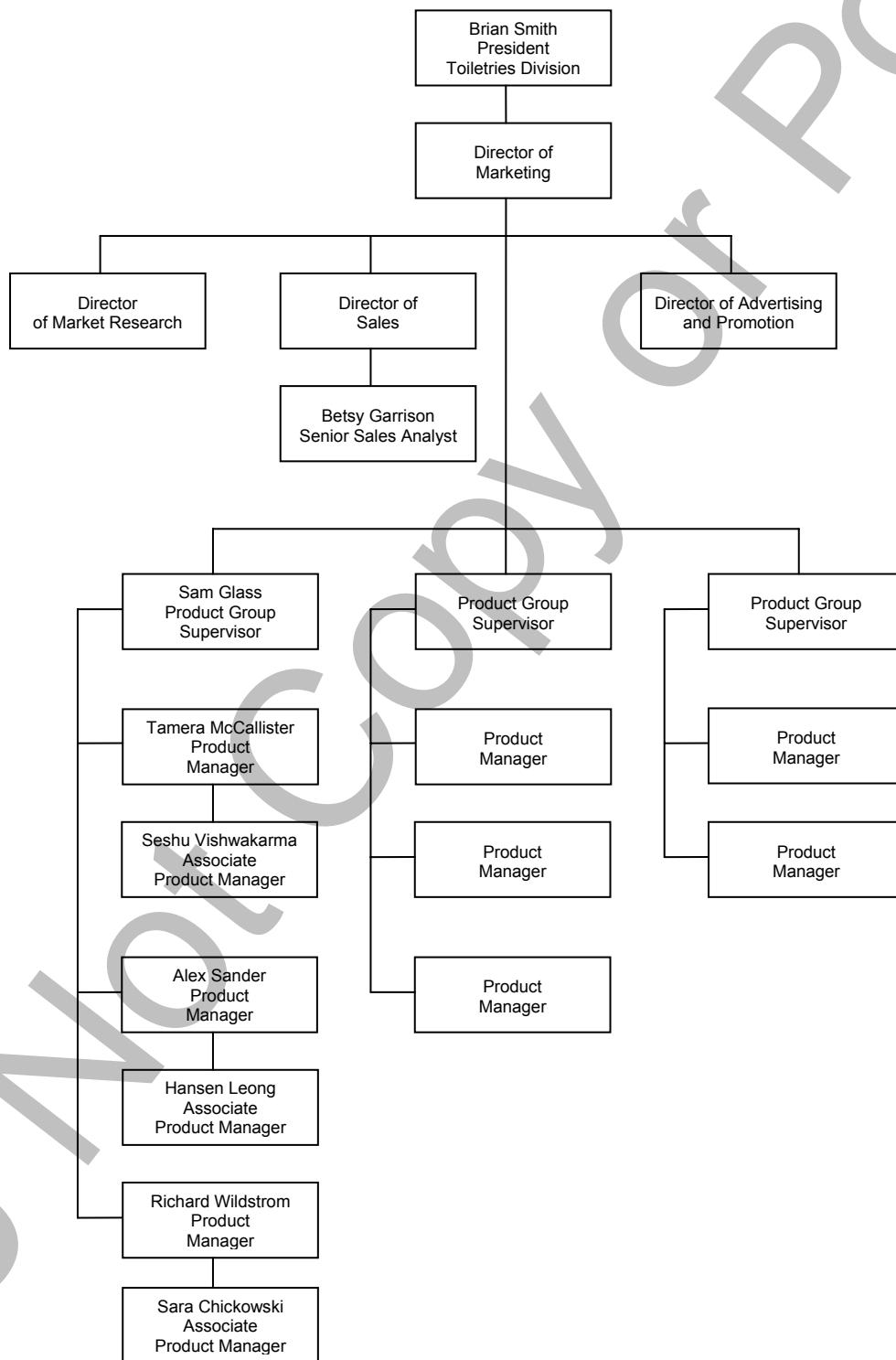


Exhibit 3 Selected Data from Alex Sander's 360° Performance/Feedback Review

Alex Sander Greatest Strengths (provide examples)	
Downward Comments ^a	
Person A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aggressiveness/initiative: Alex is a self-starter who identifies and implements whatever measures are necessary to launch products on time and on budget. Undaunted by any learning challenge: Alex exemplifies the principle of a learning organization, continually identifying gaps in personal knowledge and finding ways to gain that knowledge.
Person B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entrepreneurship: Alex has the skills and approach of an entrepreneur, unwilling to be daunted by any barrier and unwilling to take "no" from anyone, inside or outside the organization. Market/product knowledge: Alex knew relatively little about the cosmetics market at the start, but learned it fast. Alex has a far greater grasp of products than most product managers.
Person C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Willing to ask the hard questions. Alex thinks ahead and sees the implications of decisions and situations. Alex pushes and pushes for answers. Alex never simply hopes everything will somehow work out.
Person D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Never frozen by indecision. No matter what happens, Alex can compute the variables almost instantaneously and is confident in the conclusion. The problem is, Alex is seldom willing to give others time to catch up.
Upward comments ^b	
Person E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commitment: Alex works tirelessly. The flip side is that Alex expects others to work that same way, though. I can't keep up with Alex, but that does not mean I lack commitment and dedication. Multitasking: Alex has had to continually multitask to launch two products at once. I can't even imagine trying to master that many details, but Alex continually moves at a pace faster than everyone else. At first I was bothered by that, trying to keep up with all the balls Alex had in the air. Most of the rest of us have to select a few important things and do those.
Person F	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Serves as an example of self-confidence. Alex is not hobbled by a lack of confidence. Alex shows what you can do if you set your mind on something and refuse to listen to nay-sayers.
Person G	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Makes things happen. Being on a team with Alex is not for the faint of heart. However, being on a team with Alex also means you are guaranteed visibility. You know the team will produce.

^a Downward comments are from direct supervisors or individuals higher in the organizational hierarchy than the individual receiving feedback. In this case, Alex Sander provided an initial list of individuals to be invited to provide feedback; and this list was reviewed and slightly amended by Sam Glass, Sander's supervisor.

^b Upward comments are from direct reports of the individual receiving the feedback or from selected individuals lower in the hierarchy.

Exhibit 3 (continued)

Colleague comments ^c	
Person H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gives credit where credit is due. Alex ensures that teams receive due recognition even though Alex generates enough visibility on any team to take a lion's share of credit personally. • Generosity. Alex shows appreciation for work well done, such as dinners for the team working late, tickets to sports events and theater, and so on.
Person I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is willing to mentor. In several instances, Alex has shown a willingness to mentor peers in specific areas.
Person J	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creative, relentless. Alex can shake up a stodgy group faster than anyone I know. • One of the most entertaining and interesting people I know. Socially, Alex is more relaxed than at work.
Outside Landon	
Person K	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquisitive/curious. Alex is constantly searching for new information.
Person L	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impressive intellect. Alex is one of the smartest people I've ever worked with. I'm impressed that Alex went to Landon instead of one of the better-known cosmetics firms. I would expect that Alex is in a good position to negotiate any sort of employment terms with Landon, given the success of the last two launches and the importance of <i>Nourish</i> to Avant-Garde.
Self-evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Driven • Market/product savvy • Team leader

^c Colleague comments are from the individual's peers in the organization.

Exhibit 3 (continued)

Alex Sander Areas Needing Further Development (provide examples)	
Downward Comments	
Person A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can breed hostility. Though Alex typically has the right answer, every time Alex comes up with the right answer without involving the team, a lot of people feel undermined.
Person B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give up being a lone ranger. To be a leader, Alex must learn how to delegate and to motivate others to excel. Alex's heroic measures create results, but I fear other employees are getting burnt out.
Person C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too honest in critical assessments of others. Though often correct, Alex probably needs to take a broader and perhaps more mature view of our people (as well as some of our suppliers). • Reacts too quickly. Must learn to treat other people (and other people's choices) with more respect.
Person D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narcissism. No, Alex, everything is not about you.
Upward comments	
Person E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No work/life balance. Expects team members and direct reports to work extremely long hours and be willing to give up holidays or even planned vacations.
Person F	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No comment. I appreciate being included, but I am uncomfortable providing negative feedback in this format.
Person G	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not praise others often. If Alex does not tear you apart, that's as much praise as you are going to get. I realize that someone as bright as Alex may not feel the need for praise from the rest of us, but I need it. • Controls every minute detail, belittling others. Alex needs to trust that other people do actually know how to perform tasks they have been performing for a while and they do not need to be told every single step. That demotivates people.
Colleague comments	
Person H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrogance/entitlement. Alex exudes an attitude of being better than everyone else. Very off-putting.
Person I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stresses the system. Alex continually ruffles people's feelings. A lot of time is spent getting things back on an even keel.
Person J	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs work on leading virtual teams. Alex needs more people skills to generate the kinds of results achieved on the two recent U.S. launches while leading a global virtual team. Alex does not see the value in diversity of approaches and attitudes.

Exhibit 3 (continued)

Outside Landon	
Person K	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No comment
Person L	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No comment
Self-evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inflexible at work• Do not suffer fools gladly (though I could also put this under strengths).• Bad temper