

A USER'S GUIDE TO 360° FEEDBACK

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My first experience with 360° feedback was a life changing event. I was pilot testing cutting edge tools for improving personal performance at Marriott Hotels. The instrument was an automated feedback tool that measured management and leadership effectiveness. For the first time I was able to see, side by side, a graphic representation of how I, and others, viewed my effectiveness. The results were not what I expected. From my teammates' perspective, I wasn't nearly as cooperative, open, and team oriented as I believed myself to be. In effect, I was unconsciously creating a barrier between the team and myself. The feedback was, frankly, a shock. Immediately I thought of the many reasons why the data were faulty. As the denial subsided, my mind gradually opened to the information in front of me and the bigger picture came into focus. I became increasingly aware not only of my shortcomings, but of my strengths as well. The feedback gave me unparalleled insight into what was really going on between me and my team and a new found ability to make conscious choices to improve my performance. To this day, I regularly use 360° feedback to sharpen my professional abilities and personal effectiveness.

360° FEEDBACK - DEFINED

The term 360° feedback comes from the analogy to a compass: A circle with 360 points of reference used to determine and monitor direction. 360° feedback provides performance data from multiple points of reference, not just one. Like a compass, it is a navigational tool that more accurately let's us know when we are on or off course. It can fill the gaps that invariably exist between how you see yourself and how others see you. Its' purpose is, first, to gain deeper insight into how we, and others, see our performance and, second, to reinforce and accelerate the need for continuous development.

Compared to traditional, single source feedback processes, 360° feedback is significantly more powerful, reliable, and accurate. The added dimension of 360° is its' ability to compile multiple assessments from co-workers and contrast that data with your own self perceptions. Because it comes from a broader base of perception and interaction, it is less likely to be biased or skewed by one person's opinion. Traditional feedback relies heavily on only one source - the boss. In most cases people interact much more *frequently* with co-workers than with their boss. People also tend to interact *differently* with their boss. We are usually more cautious and less spontaneous when dealing with him or her. Bosses don't see as much of us or our everyday work as do co-workers and customers. Consequently, feedback from the boss, while valid, is not fully representative of a person's effectiveness in the workplace. It can be one-sided, unfair, or even vindictive, as many people know from experience. 360° feedback levels the playing field by soliciting input

from a variety of sources: The boss, peers, co-workers, people you supervise, and even customers. The feedback tends to not only be more balanced, but harder to dismiss due to its broader range of input. As one user of 360° said, "Everybody can't be out to get me."

360° FEEDBACK ANSWERS THREE BASIC QUESTIONS:

- ! Why should I improve my performance?
- ! What do I need to improve?
- ! How can I improve?

Why should I improve my performance? In today's constantly shifting work environment, the only true job security comes from the ability to continually add value to the organization. Let's be realistic, we can all improve. In the "Information Age" it is particularly important that organizations and people continually learn and grow. Otherwise, they face stagnation and joblessness. 360° feedback provides solid performance data to employees, no matter what their position or job title. It also allows the organization to scan its strengths and focus its' resources on building the skills needed for enduring success. 360° feedback provides reliable data on proficiency and performance ("*How I'm doing?*"), identifies where I need to stay current ("*What's my job requiring of me?*"), and clarifies where I might need improvement ("*What am I not doing so well?*"). Without this data, we're operating with blinders on - estimating our contribution based on self perceptions and occasional, if not rare, feedback from the boss. My personal experience is that the more feedback people have on their performance, the better their effort and results. It's a win-win.

What do I need to improve? A good 360° instrument distinguishes which skills, behaviors, or characteristics are most important to a person's job, identifies strengths and deficiencies, and provides a clear picture of how different rater groups assessed proficiency levels. The recipient can see how the boss, co-workers, and those reporting to him or her view their proficiency and effectiveness. This is particularly critical information for managers and executives because their behavior and practices affect results across teams, departments, and entire divisions.

How can I improve? A worthy feedback instrument will generate "expert" advice based on reliable research and practice, make specific recommendations on what to do, and provide a clear framework for creating a strong development plan. It will not leave the user scratching their head and wondering what it all means, what to work on, or what to do next.

People will walk away with a clear picture of what's working and what's not, and a clear, comprehensive, and specific plan to improve their performance.

HOW DO I PICK A RELIABLE 360° INSTRUMENT? WHAT SHOULD IT PROVIDE?

There are many 360° instruments on the market. Some are automated, some are not. Some are easy to use, many are not. Not all of them are worth bringing home. Ill designed and untested ones can actually be detrimental to your purposes, so be careful. Before you go looking for an instrument have a clear picture of your intended purpose, the target audience, and organizational readiness for it. It's also helpful to know your budget. Quality 360° instruments don't come cheap. Look at them as investments in the organization's future performance. That is what they are. The following is a checklist of what to look for in choosing an instrument:

- ! First and foremost, a 360° feedback instrument should be thoroughly tested for reliability and consistency. That is, it should measure what it says it measures, and do it over and over again with consistency. If it claims to measure a skill such as Planning, it should clearly define what Planning is, and accurately reflect the persons' proficiency in performing it. A well researched instrument will also be normed against a statistically valid database. This provides a reliable answer to, "How high is high? How low is low?"
- ! It should be easy to use, straightforward and simple. If not, you will get resistance to using it, which will make it practically useless. Given the state and direction of technology, I would recommend the instrument be automated for use with a personal computer.
- ! A good instrument should be clearly focused and specific around a particular set of skills, competencies, or behaviors. Anything less will produce vague and hard to use feedback. No one product will be an absolute match for your needs. Some may measure so many items that it gets very confusing trying to sort it all out. Others may have too few. Stay flexible and go with one that comes closest to your organizations' requirements.
- ! The instrument should generate *clear, detailed, and personalized* feedback for the user. The more the better. Generalized performance data is a turn-off because it doesn't produce a connection between the recipient and the feedback. Non-personalized data also makes it easier for recipients to shrug it off as meaningless fluff. A solid instrument will not only be detailed and personalized but will also provide specific suggestions for increasing performance in weaker areas. Expect to see step by step recommendations on how to improve in the subject area.
- ! A reputable 360° instrument should be capable of reassessment and not be limited to a one-time use. Multiple usage makes 360° feedback more of a developmental process than a historic event and allows the user to track improvement over time. It also reduces the cost per use. This is an important factor when assessing cost benefit.

! A quality instrument will guarantee confidentiality. No one, including the person receiving the feedback, should be able to identify who said what. This anonymity allows for more honesty and candor by assessors. It also helps to protect against recriminations should the recipient not like the feedback and search for someone to blame.

APPLICATIONS OF 360° FEEDBACK

Solid 360 feedback provides hard, actionable data on performance. Those assessed can get their hands around it, do something with it. And since it comes from people of their own choosing, it is not easy to dismiss the outcomes. Assessments quite often feel obligated to take the feedback seriously even though they may wish to avoid it. Here are several applications of the 360° process.

Personal Development

360° feedback can be used to help employees master the skills needed in their present job or prepare for a new one. It can also be used to gain the attention of those unwilling to listen to verbal feedback. Personalized and graphically displayed 360° feedback has a striking effect on people's attention.

Once digested, the information in the feedback report is next used to generate a personal improvement plan based on which skills are most important and in need of development. A good 360° instrument will provide specific, actionable feedback, along with guided, data based development.

Leader-managers find 360° feedback particularly valuable. To be successful, they need to know several things: 1) are they demonstrating competence in the skills needed to achieve the results for which they are held accountable, 2) are they using an approach or style with their teams that facilitates rather than obstructs the achievement of results, and 3) do they have the necessary competencies to navigate the uncertain waters of continuous change. Middle managers are often targets of re-structurings and downsizings. For them, survival is dependent on their ability to continually add value to the organization. 360° feedback provides a means of measuring and making sure their contributions are valued.

When framed properly in a workshop, comparative feedback from self and others sparks a hunger for ongoing improvement. I can recall many managers who, having received their feedback and created personal development plans, returned six to nine months later to reassess their performance. They were eager to get more feedback from their teams to see how much they had improved. If there is one thing that is predictable, it's that people love to hear what others have to say about them, though it may not always be favorable.

Team Development

360° feedback can also be used to stimulate team development. Most users of 360°

instruments ask co-workers or team members to provide them feedback. This usually piques the co-worker's curiosity. When the assessee shares their results (a recommended practice) and requests support from the assessors, the team member's interest is aroused even more. The next comment often heard in the team after such a discussion is, "We all ought to do this." It's not far from this point to the question, "How are we doing as a team?"

Some 360° instruments are designed for team use. The individual proficiency levels from members within a team can be compiled to provide a snapshot of the group's skill level. This profile can generate a rich discussion on which skills are most closely tied to the group's goals, and how current skill levels are driving their present performance and results. In teambuilding, using a 360° feedback process allows a team to express their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of each member. Properly facilitated, this strengthens the performance and effectiveness of the team over time. The connection of each member to the team intensifies with the understanding of their own, and each other's strengths and challenges. One's value to the team increases as their strengths are used to achieve team-based objectives. As this "teambuilding" unfolds, communication, support, interdependence, and trust tend to increase. The group profile can be used to focus and align individual development plans to a team plan. This has the effect of clustering vs. shotgunning developmental initiatives producing more concentrated results.

Change

360° feedback can be used to accelerate organizational change and transformation. It can be used across departments or divisions as a way of spotlighting the need for change and hastening the organizational "shift". I have seen major organizations put thousands of employees at all levels through 360° feedback programs designed to reduce horizontal boundaries, and increase accountability and strategic thinking. It's been used to help sweep out the old cobwebs and bring in fresh air to thinking processes. 360° feedback is used to transform cultures by providing hard data on what policies, practices, and procedures support high performance and which don't. It is often a "wake up" call for people or groups, who have been blissfully cruising along for years without a clue to how others see, or are impacted by, their performance. 360° feedback can be used as a way to identify and elevate the skills needed to thrive in a more competitive and changing world. Some instruments even measure 'readiness for' or 'resistance to' change. Framed within a discussion of customer responsiveness, for example, this can be a real eye opener.

Self Directed Teams

360° feedback strengthens accountability and self-management. Since self-directed teams are a non-traditional structure, they can use a 360° process to provide objective and reliable performance feedback for themselves individually and collectively. When a person receives high quality, reliable feedback from co-workers it highlights and reinforces the connection between individual performance and team results. Through a process of self assessment, teams can identify their developmental needs and provide their own direction for improving the level and quality of their performance. They can also include customers as part of their assessor base for added feedback dimensions.

Learning Organizations

Organizations tuned to success in the 21st century know they will be operating in a fluid, shifting environment. They are well aware that knowledge, both individual and organizational, will be a key success factor. In this climate of continuous change, 360° feedback becomes an invaluable tool to not only stay current, but to continually grow the cutting edge of the skills needed to thrive.

360° feedback can also be a quick and easy way of conducting training needs assessments. By keeping track of the skills needed and the proficiency levels demonstrated, training departments can rapidly and accurately determine the subject, content, and frequency of their program curriculum. What used to take weeks, can now be done in hours.

Perhaps more than any other tool, 360° feedback promotes continuous learning and growth because it is designed and intended for repeated, not single, use.

IMPLEMENTING 360° FEEDBACK

Because it grabs people's attention so well, 360° feedback can become part of the new foundation for increased organizational performance. But it's not "pixie dust" that you just spread around. Like most things that increase results, it requires thoughtfulness in its application.

Here are a number of do's and don'ts that have proven valuable in utilizing 360° feedback over the years.

Strategies for Success

- ! Don't force it on people
- ! Explain what it is, what it does, how it's used, and its' benefits to all concerned, continually
- ! Emphasize confidentiality
- ! Disconnect it from any compensation decisions (raises, bonuses, etc.) - make it developmental
- ! Provide information on its purpose and process to assessors
- ! Conduct structured feedback workshops for feedback recipients
- ! Spend time with those people having difficulty with their feedback
- ! Know the instrument you're using thoroughly
- ! Provide seamless coordination and support for distributing and collecting the assessment instruments
- ! Make sure your vendor provides back-up support in case problems occur with the instruments or the process
- ! Be trained in how to facilitate a 360° process. There's more to it than meets the

eye.

- ! Align your 360° process with the organization's culture, procedures, and practices. Support and reinforce it.

Guaranteed Strategies For 360° Disaster

- ! Use it inappropriately: Take an instrument designed for developmental purposes and use it to reward or punish performance (Performance Appraisal).
- ! Use 360° feedback without systemic support in place. Examples include:
 - ! No facilitated workshops to support the receiving of feedback
 - ! No institutionalized process or procedures are put in place to support, safeguard, and reinforce its benefit to the organization
 - ! Lower levels of the organization use it but not the upper levels
 - ! No up front explanation of the process to assessors or assessee
 - ! Insufficient administrative support to distribute, collect, and process assessment instruments
- ! Failure to provide support for feedback recipients. More examples:
 - ! Data "dumped" on users; no framing or context provided. ("Here, read this and get back to me.")
 - ! When contradictory or negative feedback is received, no trained facilitator is on hand to help the assessee work through it.
 - ! When feedback is rejected, no facilitator or coach is available to probe the assessee's resistance, or search for ways to allow them to "hear" the feedback
- ! Unethical behavior within the organization:
 - ! Breach of confidentiality by report processor or facilitator (leaking or talking about a person's results).
 - ! "Hammering" recipients with their results after they've shared it with facilitator or boss
 - ! Threatening assessors to reveal how they assessed someone
 - ! Recriminations against those who provided (or didn't provide) feedback to the assessee

A WORD OF CAUTION

Feedback is almost always a sensitive subject. People are often cautious, sometimes fearful, and occasionally emotional about it. A good facilitator or administrator recognizes and appreciates the sensitive nature surrounding 360° feedback and takes serious steps to insure the integrity of the process and support of the individual. Once the process has been breached by any of the above actions, it will be difficult to recover. Spend the time up front doing the homework necessary to make the process successful. The results will be more than worth it.

A SPECIAL NOTE FOR CEO's AND SENIOR MANAGERS

The performance and results achieved by an organization, whether it is product or service based, are a direct reflection of the thinking, creativity, and efforts of its members. Optimizing the capabilities of every member of the organization makes good management sense. In our emerging "knowledge society," information on one's 'ability to deliver' is invaluable for staying sharp and responsive. 360° feedback is not a fad. It will become the standard for successful operations. 360° feedback awakens the need and strengthens the drive for increased productivity. For those seriously committed to improving the performance of their organizations, it can be a powerful tool, indeed.