Article

Best Practices for 360 Feedback /

> …finding the 360 solution that is the best fit for your organization can be a lengthy process and busy organizations often forgo the research and decide to simply utilize the 360 tool that is included with their existing talent management platform.

There are many benefits to 360 feedback. However, a lot of 360 projects can go wrong, which results in poor ROI and can give a bad impression of 360 feedback. It is unfortunate some perceive 360s in a bad light because 360s were created to generate positive change within an organization.

When conducted properly, a successful 360 process has proven itself valuable to many organizations by providing insight into where people can benefit from development and growth.

To help dispel any confusion about 360s, we have decided to highlight the best practices for 360 feedback. So here it goes.

PRE-WORK

Just like with any new endeavor, you need to lay down the groundwork for 360 feedback. If the employees don't understand the 360 feedback process, it won't be as effective – simple as that. So, the company implementing a 360 needs to ensure that its employees understand exactly what the 360 process entails, what is expected of them, and how it will benefit them. That way everyone can truly prepare for the process and not be blindsided by a survey invitation.

The company needs to explain the following:

- The 360 feedback process provides leaders with a way to solicit feedback from peers, colleagues, direct reports, and their own leader. The feedback can be used as a starting point for action planning, or to plan training and set development goals.

- The 360 program can have a powerful impact for both the individual and the organization. It helps leaders get a clear picture of performance to identify weaknesses that need to be improved as well as strengths that can be leveraged. 360 feedback can also renew focus on goals and objectives, encourage constructive feedback, and clarify the roles of managers, leaders, and individual contributors.

ROLE OF THE PARTICIPANT

The participant is the person evaluated in the 360 process. Typically, the participant identifies the stakeholders that work directly with them, and is encouraged to invite as many as possible to maintain anonymity in the process.

Along with gathering feedback from others, the participants complete the survey themselves, which can help show the leader blind spots (where they rates themselves significantly higher than they are rated by others) and strengths that can be leveraged (where others perceive them as much stronger than they think they are).

ROLE OF THE RATERS

Raters are key to the success of a 360 project because they see the leaders in action day-to-day, and as a result they provide the most useful and reliable feedback. The raters can include the participant’s manager, peers, direct reports, and even external stakeholders such as customers, suppliers and board members.

The role of the raters is to provide honest and constructive feedback on their colleague’s leadership development. Raters should feel they can provide feedback without fear of identification or retaliation. The knowledge that their identity is confidential can allow the raters to focus on each question individually and think about specific work-related examples to justify ratings.

ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Anonymity and confidentiality is a vital component of the 360 process. The company needs to inform the employees that the 360 project is implemented by a third-party partner that provides systematic methods for maintaining anonymity of raters and confidentiality of survey results. In other words, no matter how the rater answers the questions, it will not threaten their job.

Important steps for maintaining anonymity and confidentiality:

Response rate
Participants should ask for feedback from a large number of raters, if possible, in order to preserve the rater anonymity. If survey response is low, data should be combined in a way that prevents the participant from identifying raters.

For example, in order to preserve anonymity a participant should collect survey data from at least three direct reports and two peers. If fewer respond, some surveys show the combined responses as “Associates” in the feedback report, others show the combined responses as “Combined.” If fewer than three associates respond, the participant will not receive data from these categories in the report.

Administrative access
Administrative access by human resources is expected in order to track statistics such as the number of surveys initiated and completed. HR might see the number of participants, but shouldn’t have access to individual raters’ responses or to the finished reports. In some cases, a summary can be provided to a supervisor or an executive team, however, it should not identify any individuals.

Open-ended comments
If raters are especially concerned about anonymity while making comments in the open-ended questions, they can word their answers in a way that avoids identifying themselves. Comments should also be reported in random order and shuffled for each question.

Maintain raters’ anonymity
If the participant tries to reach out to respondents and address their input or to find out more information, they run the risk of harming the 360 process. Leaders should respect raters’ anonymity and make no effort to identify individuals.

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Survey questions should be clearly focused and specific around a particular set of skills, competencies, or behaviors that are trainable. Common competencies measured in 360 surveys can include:

- Business acumen, decision making, team leadership, empathy, and relationship building
- Characteristics of the self, such as self-awareness and energy
- Demonstration of the values of integrity, collaboration, responsibility, and innovation.
- Conflict management, performance standards, and several others

Survey results should not affect performance assessments or incentive compensation

The 360 process is not designed to be used for performance reviews or appraisals, but rather to provide an individual with feedback on their demonstration of leadership competencies and skills.

Since the 360 process does not assess performance, there is no direct link between 360 feedback and incentive compensation.

MITIGATING RATER FATIGUE

Leaders are increasingly asked to complete a variety of surveys and assessments and as such the risk of rater fatigue is very real, especially with larger 360 rollouts. Not addressing this potential problem could lead to a lack of engagement, fewer returned surveys and most concerning, raters skimming through surveys too quickly to provide accurate feedback.

The good news is that there are certain steps you can take to help mitigate potential rater fatigue:

- Proactive communication to your population can go a long way. Including topics such as the importance of feedback being accurate, mentioning why the company is doing this and how results will be used. Acknowledging raters busy workload and thanking them in advance can help as well. The key here is to gain buy-in early but don't stop there; be sure to continue reinforcing your message throughout the process.

- Advise your participants on who should, and who should NOT, be invited to rate them. The goal is to invite only those individuals who directly interact with the participant in their job function on a regular basis.

- Ensure your assessment is "right sized" and measuring only the core competencies your effort is focused on. This is especially important in large or company wide 360 rollouts where the difference between a 30 question survey and a 60 question survey can have a significant impact.

- Rather than launching to an entire group at one time, staggering your rollout can not only ease the burden of raters, it can make administering the effort more manageable and ultimately more effective.

DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

Development is the fundamental purpose of 360 feedback surveys, and proper interpretation of feedback results is the first step to acting on them. We strongly encourage first time participants to attend a facilitated training session or one-on-one coaching, either in-person or virtually.

Proper guidance can increase the success of a 360 feedback program by teaching participants how to interpret results and tie them back to career and performance goals through development planning.

Working with a coach is important because coaches can help defuse emotional responses, focus on behavior for improvement, and help put the results in context in the participant's role, environment, and those around them.

ONGOING PROCESS

A participant's development plan should include specific activities and timing, but keep in mind that leadership skills are learned and developed over time. We believe the 360 feedback process should be repeated every 12 to 18 months, so participants can measure progress and identify ongoing development requirements and make adjustments to their development plan.

CONCLUSION

There you have it. When the 360 process is done properly, you will see measurable results in the organization.