Create an action plan for employees and overall organizational training.

Implementing an Effective 360-Degree Feedback Process

BY MARCIE LEVINE

Your manager has asked you to administer a 360-degree feedback process for the company from start to finish. Perhaps you have provided feedback to a co-worker as a rater in a 360-degree assessment or have gone through a 360-degree feedback process yourself. Or maybe you have no personal experience with this feedback process.

Many choices go into creating and implementing this process in a successful way: How many questions should I use? How many raters does each participant need? What response scale would provide optimum feedback? Do I need to use comment questions? Who should see the report?

Breaking the process down into six steps and thinking through each decision can help increase the odds that your feedback process goes smoothly and has a favorable impact:

1. Determine the objective.
2. Choose a supplier.
3. Design the assessment.
4. Prepare participants and raters.
5. Go live.
6. Deliver feedback with support.

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Determine the objective

SurveyConnect research shows that approximately 75 percent of organizations use 360-degree assessments as a development or coaching tool; the rest use them for both development and decision making (for example, succession planning or bonus decisions).

One objective of a 360-degree feedback process is to improve leaders' behavior within selected competencies (topics) to move both participants (people being rated) and the organization toward success. Another more individualized objective could be that the participants come away understanding the three things people value most about working with them and two ideas to become more effective going forward.

Once you have determined your 360-degree feedback process's objective, write a plan that includes key actions, dates, roles, and responsibilities. You'll also need to identify the resources needed to administer the assessments and communicate the results to the participants.

Choose a supplier

You can choose from several different types of tools and suppliers that support the 360-degree or multirater feedback process. The right choice for you and your organization will depend on your objectives and resources. Here are a few options:

- **Self-service survey tools** not necessarily focused on 360-degree assessments. Although inexpensive, the individual reporting output on these sites was not designed with these assessments in mind. Only use these sites if you are familiar with the design, communication, implementation, and debriefing components of 360-degree assessments; there won't be much (if any) professional 360 support.
- **Self-service feedback tools** designed for ongoing feedback from different people on an ad hoc basis, generated by any employee. This software enables employees at all levels to own the feedback process, but the organization's culture must be attuned, trained, and open to this process. This type of system is a great adjunct to more formalized annual multirater processes.
- **Nonself-service platforms** that enable you to configure your assessment, settings, communications, and reports, with professional support along the way. This type of platform offers the best of both worlds: you drive many of the choices in the process, making sure they align with your organization's values and competencies, and you can tap into professional expertise as needed. These platforms can ramp up from individuals to large groups of employees.
- **360-degree assessments as an added service** to project-based or ongoing consulting or coaching. These types of assessments can be standardized or custom; the standard ones may have a normative comparison available. These are usually the most expensive 360s, used at an organization's higher levels.

Design the assessment

First, determine which competencies will help you reach your objectives. The basis for competency selection can be an existing organizational competency model or knowledge of what focus areas will lead to individual and organizational success. Many deployments cover eight to 10 competencies, with about four to six scalable questions per competency.

Many organizations use one set of multirater assessment questions for all deployments. Others develop multiple assessments for use within an organization; these are generally built around organizational levels (for example, strategic or operational).

The number of questions in an assessment can vary. Some have 15 questions and others have more than 100. About 80 percent of the assessments we prepare for our clients have 40 to 60 questions. This survey length allows for depth and understanding of the feedback while remaining considerate of completion time for raters who may have to take multiple assessments.

When writing questions, start with active verbs. Also phrase all questions in a positive way.

Including an area for open-ended comments is beneficial because this information is integral to explaining the assessment's quantitative results. However, adding too many comment questions can exacerbate survey fatigue. I recommend including two or three open-ended comment questions at the end of the assessment. For example:

- What do you value most about working with this person?
- What would make this person more effective on the job?

Most questions are scored using multiple-choice scales, and often clients ask whether they should use an even- or odd-numbered scale (generally four or five points). Some administrators prefer not to have a middle ground such as "neutral," forcing respondents to have an opinion, while others like that middle point.

More than 80 percent of our customers use a five-point scale (with a "not applicable" choice). A popular scale is "strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree, N/A." The scale needs to flow with the format of your question; if the selected scale is an agreement scale, the questions must be statements with which the subject can agree or disagree.

Prepare participants and raters

Tell the respondent group (both participants and raters) in advance about the assessment. They need to know why you're conducting the assessment, how you'll use the information gathered, and when and how you'll administer the assessment.

Let people know how raters will be selected. A reasonable philosophy is to ask a participant's manager, all her direct reports, and four to six peers or colleagues of her own choosing to be raters. Raters should work closely enough (and long enough) with a participant to be able to provide relevant feedback.

Notify both your participants and raters about what will happen with the assessment output. Who will see the report—the participant, his coach, his manager? What will be done with the output from the report—will it be used for development only, succession planning, selecting training courses? Will it affect performance appraisals? And what is expected from the participant after the report is distributed—will he be expected to create an action plan, share the report with his raters and manager, or work with a coach on the output of the report?

Participants will probably ask about anonymity. A feedback report should categorize the quantitative information into groups of respondents (for example, self, manager, direct reports, and peers), but it should not identify raters to rankings or comments. Present the comments verbatim but don't attribute them to the person who made them. The exception is the manager's ratings, which often will not be anonymous because there is usually only one person in this category.

Go live

Most assessments capture data for about two weeks, and most administrators will extend that timeline by another week as the deadline approaches. Send reminders every three to five business days to those raters who owe assessments.

As far as response rates go, striving for 100 percent completed responses is admirable but rarely achievable. Most administrators are happy when the assessment completion rate exceeds 85 percent.

Deliver feedback with support

A consultant, coach, internal assessment administrator, or supplier can generate an individual's 360-degree feedback report. Often, someone will meet privately with each participant to debrief the report. In our research, only 9 percent of companies often or always provide the report to the participant without a facilitator. The feedback review should include a balanced approach: Identifying the things someone does well is just as important as pointing out areas for improvement.

The debriefer should share with the participant how to understand the messages and themes in the report. A participant should look at the highest-scoring questions and ask, "Is this where I add value?" Then the participant should consider the lowest-scoring questions and ask whether these are areas to improve upon. In doing so, she is looking at the relativeness of the scores, not the absolute numbers. The debriefer also should help a participant understand how themes within the report's feedback run within and through the various competencies.

What comes next?

After going through the debrief process and determining the themes and messages in the report, the participants should share this information with their managers. Based on this knowledge, the employee and manager can create an action plan.

Some participants may wish to take a strength and make it stronger, while others may prefer to take issues that are problem areas and improve one or two. Ongoing discussions, usually on a quarterly basis, keep the action plan relevant and on track. Annual 360-degree assessments can then track progress over time.

It can be beneficial to collect organizational data to understand the profile of the total population of participants or some subgroup (for example, by location, department, or level). Our research shows that these data are only used in about one-third of organizations. However, it can help inform management and leadership training programs and workshops. It also can help show organizational progress and the benefit of conducting 360-degree assessments over time.

Successful 360-degree assessments require planning and a commitment. By using current technology and following these steps, you can make the process of designing, administering, and analyzing 360-degree assessments a positive one. If done well, making these assessments a process in your organization can help keep employees on a favorable track, enable you to measure the gains in employee performance and leadership, and improve your overall organizational performance.

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