

## Using 360-degree feedback to change a leader's behavior

Gathering feedback from an employee's subordinates, peers, and supervisor — known as “360-degree feedback” — has grown in popularity as a relatively low-cost, easy-to-administer tool to provide data and direction for professional development efforts. This feedback can identify important areas for improvement and help employees change behavior — if it's used correctly. However, if 360-degree feedback is not implemented well, it can be a waste of time and money — or worse, it may even lower morale and productivity.



**Strategies**

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What's the difference between success and failure? Companies who follow best practices are more likely to use 360-degree feedback as part of a robust and

sophisticated leadership development program. In such cases, 360 feedback is one source of information in an overall process and is tied to professional development first, not performance. There also should be a support system in place to help participants translate their findings into action plans.

Let's look at three key steps for making 360 surveys more effective, as well as ways that an organization can get the most value for its time and money.

1. Information gathered during a 360 feedback process should be used first and foremost for professional development and only secondarily as a tool for managing performance. In other words, the best use of this feedback is to identify areas where employees need to grow their skills, which then translates via action plans into improved performance. Thus, the content of 360 surveys needs to be directly related to the skills required on the job.

Unfortunately, some organizations focus on performance first and run the risk of compromising the validity of 360 feedback. For example, when pay increases or promotions depend on “earning” specific 360 ratings, employees may inflate ratings to benefit their co-workers (and expect the same treatment in return). Similarly, if 360 results are used to justify demotions or firings, employees will be reluctant to provide candid feedback, for fear that someone else may provide data that will be used against them.

Nonetheless, many companies continue to use 360s as part of their performance-review process and equate “development” with “performance,” or pay only lip service to development issues. Instead, 360s should be used principally to identify opportunities for professional growth.

2. The 360 survey process must be anonymous and objective. Naturally, people are curious to know how specific individuals may have rated them, but the ability to tie feedback results to the people who provided them undermines the outcomes of the 360. Individuals may discount negative feedback based on its source, become demotivated, or in some instances even retaliate against someone who gave a negative review.

Respondents also must feel comfortable providing constructive criticism. Otherwise, the 360 can wind up as a popularity contest. The survey participants must understand the importance of a broad, objective assessment — and that balanced feedback (positive and constructive) is not intended to hurt the performance evaluation of the subject, but rather to help that individual grow and improve.

3. The organization must provide adequate support to help participants translate the feedback from 360 surveys into an action plan for professional development. Given the likelihood (even desirability) of constructive feedback, experts such as HR professionals or outside consultants and coaches must be available to help the subject interpret, reframe, and

translate the feedback in a useful, helpful way. Feedback alone isn't enough. Individuals must recognize that the organization expects changes in behavior, that the individual's boss will support the steps needed to make those changes, and that improvement will be recognized and rewarded.

This means completing the circle by translating 360 feedback into ongoing on-the-job development experiences. Most of us are not motivated to change our behavior simply because we know we have to change. (If we were, dieting would be easy.) Instead, people change by practicing new behaviors, confronting challenges with new skills, and receiving constructive support and reinforcement.

How can an organization derive better value for the time and money invested in 360s? The key is to make 360 feedback part of a broader, ongoing development effort for the employee. It's easy for employees to personalize comments and become angry or defensive when 360 feedback is the only link in the chain. Instead, the 360 must be one key resource in identifying specific, defined behaviors that will help an employee achieve better results within the organization.

Finally, 360s also depend on the commitment of the individual. My doctoral research on 360 reviews demonstrated that people who tried hard to change their skills in leading people tended to have higher ratings over time. Not surprisingly, there's an important relationship between the effort to change and improved ratings of effectiveness. If participants are not engaged, committed and active in the process — and willing to make a sincere effort to change — then no amount of feedback will produce the desired results.

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