Making Your 360 Degree Feedback more effective in delivering successful behavioural change

Research Findings & The 10 Key Questions for Success

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360 Degree Feedback is used by many organisations, as part of assessment, development, performance and talent management. Ultimately the aim of 360 Degree Feedback is to create behaviour change at the individual level. This should then feed into better working relationships, more employee engagement, and finally, the achievement of the organisation's goals.

So what does successful 360 Degree Feedback look like?

As well as supporting the intended behaviour changes, it's important that there are positive consequences to the 360 process itself, including:

- *Individuals feeling that they have been empowered by the information they've received, not damaged by it*
- *Line managers and team leaders feeling they have a tool that will help them support performance and development*
- *There is a willingness and trust in the process and people who haven't been through the 360 ask if they can be involved too!*
- *The organisation has valuable data for decision making on training, talent development, promotion and succession*

However, by its nature, 360 Degree Feedback is a tricky beast with a number of key areas that must be planned and designed in advance if the ultimate goal of behavioural change is to be achieved.

Research findings

A lot of research has been done over the years on the effectiveness of 360 Degree Feedback. Here are some examples:

In an article from 2009 in Consulting Psychology Journal, Kenneth M Nowack describes the key interventions by an organisation that will increase the effectiveness and value of 360 Degree Feedback.

These are:

1. ***Invite at least 8-9 people in rater groups (other than manager) to respond, and agree the final rater pool with the participant's manager or coach***
2. ***Provide access to a coach or manager with experience in 360 to help the participant with understanding and using their report***
3. ***Make sure the 360 includes both quantitative (numerical) and qualitative (open-ended) questions***
4. ***Hold line managers to account for meeting with their direct reports, understanding the 360, setting an action plan and following up on a regular basis to keep the participant on track***
5. ***Make sure action plans are based on meaningful and measurable activities and behaviours – and make sure participants are given the opportunity to practice them***
6. ***While recognising the value of Strengths-based development, ensure that those Strengths are not overused, such that they become weaknesses***
7. ***Repeat 360s between 12 and 24 months to measure ongoing improvement and progress***
8. ***Get feedback from all raters as well as participants on the process – and measure the results for the organisation as well as individuals***

In another article in the Journal of Business Psychology (David W Bracken and Dale S Rose. (2011) 26:183-192) the authors survey research over the past decade into 360 Degree Feedback and the conditions under which it creates behaviour change.

The meta-research focuses on how best to design a 360 feedback process that can be most effective across a large number of participants in a group or organisation, rather than on an individual basis. This is certainly what many organisations with whom we work use 360 for – creating group or organisation change that is specific to, and aligns with, the organisation's unique goals. The research also looks at how to build sustainability into the 360, so that it remains repeatable and valuable for the foreseeable future.

The key features of 360 Degree Feedback that have been shown to be most likely to bring about behaviour change are Acceptance and Accountability. Census participation, that is, participation of all leaders and managers, is critical for long-term sustainability.

Acceptance:

Although 360 Degree Feedback is often cited as something that provides much-needed awareness and insight for participants, it is the acceptance of the 360 data and process that has been shown to create the greatest behaviour change.

To maximise the probability of acceptance, research shows that the 360 must include:

1. ***Relevant content i.e. content that is specific and customised to the unique strategy of the organisation. This has the benefit of increasing the level of engagement in the 360, and of reinforcing organisational messages.***

2. ***Credible data:***
    a. ***There must be enough raters for the feedback to be valid***
    b. ***They must be right raters from the ratee's point of view (i.e. people who are able to observe them and give meaningful feed-back),***
    c. ***Ratees should be able to choose at least some of their own raters***
    d. ***360 items or statements should be clear and unambiguous, there should be no 'trick questions', negatively stated items or reverse wordings***
    e. ***Ratings scales should be clear***
    f. ***Rater training or briefings should be given to ensure consistency***

Accountability:

Even if the 360 data itself has been accepted, accountability needs to be built in to the process to endorse and embed the required behavioural change.

Accountability consists of one or more of the following:

1. ***A minimum of one coaching session on their 360 Degree Feedback***
2. ***The involvement of the ratee's boss in their action and development planning***
3. ***Discussion of the feedback with direct reports and other raters***
4. ***Consistent policies for use of 360 in other HR activities, including staffing, succession planning, high-potential selection/development, training/development selection and performance management.***

These elements help to demonstrate the value of the feedback across the organisation, as well as the ratee's commitment to change. Point 3 allows for further clarification of the feedback if needed and engages raters in action planning. It also helps raters become better at rating, and calibrates their use of the 360 for the next time.

Accountability and sharing of the feedback has also been show to override resistance to behavioural change in ratees because of the involvement of other colleagues.

Census participation

Census participation, that is participation of all leaders and managers in 360 Degree Feedback, has been shown to have beneficial effect and to support behaviour change, and also to maintain the momentum and benefits of the 360 into the future.

Having all leaders/managers participate in the organisation's 360:

- ***Maximises the leadership message by clearly stating what is expected of leaders***
- ***Communicates an expectation of accountability for leader and manager behaviour***
- ***Creates efficiencies of scale and process***
- ***Creates a climate of consistency and fairness***
- ***Provides consistent leader and manager data for decision making***
- ***Builds a culture of observation, feedback and honesty***
- ***Allows all employees to become better raters and users of the 360 over time***

So what does this mean in practice? 10 Key Questions for Success

We've distilled the research and our practical experience of running 360 Degree Feedback into 10 Key Questions to consider when planning your 360 Degree Feedback project:

1. What outcomes to you want from the 360 Degree Feedback?

Being very clear at the start on what you're going to get out of the 360 Degree Feedback process is key. It helps if you can define what changes you want to see as a result of the 360 Degree Feedback.

For example, if you are going to use 360 as part of a leadership development programme, good questions to ask yourself and your team might be: 'Is this 360 going to help people identify their learning needs for leadership and management development?' or 'How will 360 support our Talent Management plans?', or, 'How will we know that the 360 has changed behaviours?'.

There may also be some secondary, but very important, outcomes from the 360, like building a culture of feedback in the organisation, embedding a set of core capabilities and values, or defining the specific behaviours you expect from your leaders, managers or other groups.

Asking yourself these questions will help you to position the 360 Degree Feedback as part of your overall People strategy, not just a one-off management 'fad'. It will also help you with all your communications and implementation.

2. What exactly is the 360 Degree Feedback going to measure?

Be very clear on what you intend to measure with the 360 tool. For instance, if the feedback is going to measure leadership or management skills, make sure that the 360 statements are specifically asking about those management skills that are important and relevant for your company.

3. Should you customise your 360?

Off-the-shelf statements or generic lists are a great source of feedback which support individuals in their career discussions, and can help them to identify individual issues they need to overcome. However, to create a consistent approach to management or leadership that is unique to the organisation, a 360 that is customised can be very powerful. With customisation, a clear link can be built and demonstrated between individual behaviours and the goals of the organisation.

In addition, employees and learners have been shown to have a negative response to statements that sound too generic, 'corporate' and don't relate to their own organisation. Tailored 360 Degree Feedback that's intelligent, customised and relevant can get a better quality response from more people that generic, off the shelf 360. As the research shows, the more relevant and specific the 360 is, the more people are likely to recognise its relevance and engage with it.

4. Are your 360 Degree Feedback statements related to specific, observable behaviours?

If you do decide to use a customised 360, and you base it on your organisation's competency sets, values, skills sets or other frameworks, it's important to review your statements to make sure that they work as rating items for a 360. In other words, is the statement describing an action or behaviour that can be observed? For example, I often see statements like "Strives to continually exceed customer service expectations". That's not helpful; how can you tell if someone strives or not? Statements should be specific demonstrable actions, such as "Proactively contacts the client on a regular basis", "Finds ways of exceeding what we currently do to meet customer's expectations" or "Shares customer feedback to ensure we are exceeding customers' expectations".

Also, consider whether the statement can be observed by the people who are going to be asked to rate the statement? For example, will a junior colleague be in a position to rate their boss on statements about strategic activities or client relationships? It may be that we do want these behaviours to be visible to all raters, but it's a good check.

Does the statement work with the rating scale you intend to use? It's important to check each statement against the ratings scale to make sure they make sense. For example, the statement 'Regularly discusses performance issues with colleagues' does not work with the rating scale 'Always/Often/Sometimes/Never' And finally, look out for ambiguous statements, which are unclear, or contain more than one observable behaviour, the classic example being 'Requests and acts on feedback from colleagues'. And mixing positively and negatively stated items, for example, including items like 'Does not share information with others' makes it very difficult to rate against most rating scales.

5. How long will it take to complete the 360 questionnaire?

It may sound trivial, but the length of your 360 can make a big difference to the level of engagement, quality and quantity of the feedback that people receive.

We have worked with clients who started off with a 360 questionnaire of over 170 questions in their 360 Degree Feedback - this is far too many. Apart from the time factor for raters completing the feedback, a ratee can only focus on a small number of key learning points and goals at a time. Keep the feedback focused on the key areas for change in your company. And think of the people who have to give feedback on more than one person! In our experience the best number of questions for an effective 360 Degree Feedback is between 20 and 40.

6. Is your senior management or Board fully supportive?

Senior sponsorship and participation is very important if you are introducing 360 Degree Feedback into your organisation for the first time. Without visible support from the leaders in the business, your 360 project may end up as just another chore or tick-box exercise for the rest of the company. If possible, get the leaders to be the first group to do 360 Degree Feedback in the company. This will allow them to understand the process in depth, talk about it to their teams, and show the importance of the feedback culture coming right from the top of the organisation.

7. Have you build confidentiality into the 360 Degree Feedback process?

By putting a few key steps in your feedback process, you can ensure confidentiality and therefore help people to trust the process. Easy steps include requiring feedback from at least three colleagues, and ensuring that the 360 report randomises the scores and comments.

8. How is the 360 Feedback reported?

Too many statistics, means, averages and graphs just end up confusing people and taking their focus off the key messages that the feedback is giving. The key things that people need to know from their 360 feedback are:

1) Their main areas of strength

2) The key areas they need to improve.

9. Have you put in place a clear debriefing process for each ratee?

The research is very clear, and our experience is that without this very important step, a lot of the effort spent in designing 360 and collating the feedback can be wasted.

Ratees need to be briefed and helped through the process and the 360 feedback they receive. Provide one-to-one support for people to understand and interpret their feedback, either from their line manager, coach or HR, and train line managers and coaches to use 360 to develop their people.

10. Stay consistent

Ensure consistency across the organisation by linking the 360 Degree Feedback with other activities, including as an input into performance, training and development discussions, for assessment and tracking of management and leadership skills and potential, and for succession and career planning. A 360 Degree Feedback that relates to other people development and training activities is much more relevant and likely to be valued and used again.

Technical issues matter too

We're often contacted by companies who have run 360 in the past. We ask them what went well, and what didn't go well. And the evidence is clear: a poor experience by users, no matter how good the 360 instrument is, or how much communication there has been, can ruin all the good work you have put in to preparing for this.

People are busy and stressed, and often log in to complete their self review and colleagues' feedback during work time, or outside work hours. If ratees and raters schedule time out of their day to do this task, it's really important that their experience is seamless and easy for them, in that they should not even have to think about the technical side of what they're doing. If they have problems with access, or slow support, or can't navigate around the system easily, their frustration will mean they have a less than positive attitude towards the 360 itself. Similarly, as we've said above, reports that are dense, full of statistics or difficult to read, can also be an off-putting experience for both ratees and their debriefers.

Therefore finding an online 360 delivery tool that gives you the maximum flexibility for design, but that is also easy and intuitive to use, is critical to the success of your 360 project. In addition, your online 360 delivery tool should provide you with:

- ***A clearly mapped process for each stage of the process***
- ***Support for you and your users***
- ***Reporting at individual, team and organisation level***
- ***Assurance of confidentiality and additionally, security of the data being collected***

360 Degree Feedback can be highly effective!

I hope that I've helped to iron out some of the complexity around 360 Degree Feedback, and shown you that, with the right planning, 360 can be a successful and highly effective tool for developing your key organisational capabilities.

Jo Ayoubi is the author of The Consultants Guide to Success with 360 Degree Feedback.

Track Surveys designs bespoke 360 Degree Feedback which allows clients to fully align 360 Degree Feedback with their organisations' development, talent and leadership strategies.

On the delivery side, Track 360 is the brand name for Track's 360 Degree Feedback delivery system, which we have developed in-house and have refined over the past 13 years based on our customers' changing requirements.

Every single Track 360 Degree Feedback that we run is fully customisable and supported by online access to information and help, from a UK-based helpdesk and support team.

To talk to us about how we can help with any aspect of your 360 DegreeFeedback project,

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