Implementing 360 degree feedback

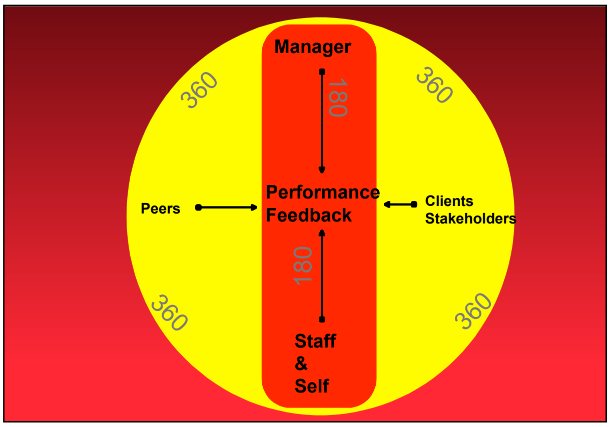
By David Parmenter

What are the best ways to make the 360 degree feedback process work? What can you do to make the process less time consuming for the organisation?

Participants in our better practice studies* have found practical solutions to both these questions.

We have noted the increasing use of 360 degree feedback and the positive responses with which it has been received. However, a common complaint is the time spent in making the system work.

<u>The difference between a 90,180 and 360 degree feedback process</u>



Implementation of a 360 degree feedback process is not an easy road. Participants comment that it takes a couple of runs to "bed it in" properly.

The purpose of this article is to help with the implementation of 360 degree feedback. Before we do this it is worthwhile to focus back on the benefits, which include:

Key Benefits of 360 degree feedback

- Comprehensive feedback on performance
- More rounded feedback on performance
- To facilitate performance improvements
- An aid to career development and staff retention
- Better workplace relationships

Ways to make the 360 degree process work

- Make it voluntary
- Make it clear who owns the 360 degree reports
- Divorce the 360 feedback from salary reviews
- Phase 360 degree feedback throughout the year
- Pilot your first 360
- Take care designing your report format
- Avoid trying to get detail you will not use

Make it voluntary

As the saying goes you can "**you can lead a horse to water but you cannot make it drink".** There is little point in making staff do a 360 when they are not in the right space to appreciate feedback. Each report may involve at least 3 to 4 hours of other staff members' time, time which could be better spent elsewhere.

Staff often find a 360 degree feedback challenging, and should not be forced into the process. However, it should be made clear that long term non involvement is likely to limit their ability to improve their career skills.

Introducing a 360 feedback process takes a reasonable marketing effort. It is important that the staff understand the purpose, how they will benefit and how to complete it. Running a workshop a few times so that all staff have an opportunity to attend is the most effective way. This also gives staff the opportunity to add some input into the questionnaire design.

Make it clear who owns the 360 degree reports

This is a question of ownership. Who owns the 360 degree report, the individual, the manager or the HR function? If the results are for the individual's own information only, then they are more inclined to obtain more balanced feedback. If they are used for appraisal or salary reviews, then the selection of respondents may be more biased.

Divorce the 360 degree feedback from salary reviews

We subscribe to the camp that believes that 360 degree is best left as a performance development tool and hence the report should be owned by the individual. This does not preclude using the 360 in the salary review, as the individual can table the report if they wish.

Phase 360 degree feedback throughout the year

If you agree that a 360 degree is a tool for personal development it does not need to be carried out for everyone in the specified group at the same time. One participant phases the performance assessment around the individuals' birthdays. This also spreads the time commitment of respondents and thus improves the quality of their feedback, especially the comments.

The comments are the most important feedback and these suffer when there is a pile of 15 or more to do.

Pilot your first 360

Piloting the 360 gives staff the chance to experience a 360 and the opportunity to fine tune the questionnaire before it is let loose. One participant started the 360 degree feedback process in a department which was prepared and keen to champion the process for the organisation.

Another participant piloted the 360 with some influential staff who represented all the different job categories. Their positive experience was then channelled back to those who may have had reservations about the purpose and the benefits.

Take care designing your report format

Handling how the results are reported and delivered is paramount to the success of the 360 degree process. The report should contain: a summary which pulls together the main themes from the scores and the respondents' comments; categorised respondent comments; and the scores matrix.

There is often the dilemma as to how to present all the many and varied respondents' comments. We believe that how you handle and interpret these has a major bearing on the reports usefulness.
One participant has put the respondents' comments section in front of the scores. Comments on, for example, personal management are grouped together with the positive comments in bold followed by suggestions for development.

Avoid trying to get information you will not use

We see a number of 360 questionnaires and are amazed at the number of questions that are being asked. A good test is to ask oneself what can be done with the feedback. If the information is simply "nice to have" then eliminate it.

Yet many organisations are spending vast amounts of time with questionnaires, asking up to 100 questions and some cases requiring each individual to rate 100 questions on two scales (competence and importance).

If each individual has the option of sending out up to 8 questionnaires you will have a monster on your hands and very soon, middle and senior management will have over 15 forms to complete, your non returns will soar, or the quality of comments provided by respondents will diminish.

One participant has reduced the 360 feedback to 20 statements to respond to and they have managed a return rate of over 85% (some 5000 responses).

One participant comments that "we have found it to be most useful when the 360 focuses on work outputs rather than individual characteristics. Individual characteristics do form part of the feedback, but only in the context of how they are demonstrated in achieving work outputs. It takes away some of the personal pickiness about peoples characters, and instead emphasises business result, which after all is the reason we are at work."

By all means have a section where competencies are ranked in important by respondents, but use section headings and ask respondents only to rate the top five.

Last words

1. Make it an electronic document where the feedback is cut and pasted into the database (or even better have respondents accessing a user friendly database)
2. Data entry instruction fields should be highlighted
3. All staff should receive their report in a "safe environment" either in a one-on-one counselling session or in a session delivered by a skilled facilitator
4. Treat it as a development tool rather than an appraisal tool. The final report should go directly to the staff member concerned, rather than to their manager.
5. Design your form so that it can be completed in less than 20 minutes (limit to 60 questions, and avoid dual scales)

* waymark solutions limited formerly Davies, Parmenter & Associates run better practice studies throughout the year. The firm specialises in the measurement of performance, practices and satisfaction. Managing Director David Parmenter can be contacted on:
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