

360-degree feedback: Can it improve the way we handle daily feedback?

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1 INTRODUCTION

There has been little or no research investigating the extent to which 360-degree feedback assists in the development of face-to-face feedback skills. Instead, an inherent, but rarely explicit, principle of 360 design is that anonymous, numerical ratings are necessary in order to side-step weaknesses in face-to-face feedback, specifically the emotional reactions and lack of feedback skills amongst raters and those being rated.

As a contrast, imagine a group of workers who are able to handle the emotions of giving and receiving both positive and negative feedback. How would such a group of workers actually feel about feedback? What would their emotions be? Inquisitive, curious, relaxed? They would certainly have a sense of their own, and each other's, worth. They would have self-efficacy, a quality that opens them to being ready to learn and acquire new skills and knowledge about themselves and others and a quality that means they believe that they can change behaviour and learn what is necessary to change and learn (Bandura 1986). In such an environment, devoid of negative emotions about how others view us, how would feedback be viewed?

Now imagine that same group of workers as people who are skilled in giving structured feedback in a way that others can hear – and who are similarly skilled in seeking feedback and making sense of feedback about their own behaviour and their effect on others. How would such a group of workers actually behave around feedback? How would feedback be integrated into frequent, informal conversation? How would project reviews be carried out?

The purpose of this paper is to identify what we have learnt from the process of carrying out 360-degree feedback – and how we can transfer this learning to a face-to-face feedback situation.

2 WHAT IS 360-DEGREE FEEDBACK?

The term '360° feedback ®' is actually a registered trademark of TEAMS, Inc – a company that did some pioneering work on the theory and its application. The original terms for this type of process were multi-rater appraisal (MRA) or multi-source appraisal (MSA) (Hurley 1998).

Although there will be, at times, significant differences in the 360 process across organisations, some core characteristics are becoming the norm. 360-degree feedback is a method and a tool that provides each employee the opportunity to receive performance feedback from their supervisor and four to eight peers, reporting staff members, co-workers and customers. Most 360-degree feedback tools are also responded to by each individual in a self-assessment. 360-degree feedback allows each individual to understand how their effectiveness as an employee, co-worker or staff member is viewed by others. The most effective processes provide feedback that is based on behaviours that other employees can see. The feedback provides insight about the skills and behaviours desired in the organisation to accomplish the mission, vision and goals and live the values. The feedback is firmly planted in behaviours needed to exceed customer expectations. People who are chosen as raters, usually choices shared by the organisation and employee, generally interact routinely with the person receiving feedback. The purpose of the feedback is to assist each individual to understand his or her strengths and weaknesses, and to contribute insights into aspects of their work needing professional development. This section offers an overview of the process from the perspectives of both an individual participant (feedback recipient) and an organisation introducing a 360-degree feedback process.

2.1 The individual's perspective

The steps that an individual typically follows when completing a 360 are set out in Figure 1 overleaf. At each of these steps there are particular characteristics which set 360 feedback apart from face-to-face feedback:

Step 1

There are a number of reasons why an individual may decide to complete a 360, including:

- Discontent with their line manager's appraisal ratings;
- A requirement to complete a 360 as part of a development programme or other initiative;
- A desire to prepare for a forthcoming assessment centre by ensuring that feedback addresses all of the organisation's competency framework;
- Inquisitiveness, desire to learn from feedback and an expectation that 360 will deliver different and more objective feedback than will be the case with face-to-face feedback (this is referred to as a 'learning orientation' and 'desire for useful information' by Tuckey et al, 2002); and
- A desire to be seen as being open to feedback (impression management).

Step 2

The initial conversation may focus largely on logistical issues of timing and computer access. Beyond this, the individual may be encouraged to consider:

- Their own objectives in using 360;
- How these relate to business objectives and organisational expectations;
- The level of risk that an individual feels ready to take and the degree to which they wish to use the 360 as a way of opening up discussion with those with whom they have a less positive working relationship; and
- The most appropriate choice of raters given the above.

Step 3

The individual chooses their raters to cover specific groups:

- Manager(s);
- Peers (usually within the organisation); and
- Direct reports.

Additional groups could include:

- Senior colleagues;
- External suppliers and customers; and
- Professional colleagues outside the organisation.

A guideline is to choose sufficient raters to end up with at least three in each group, in order to protect anonymity.

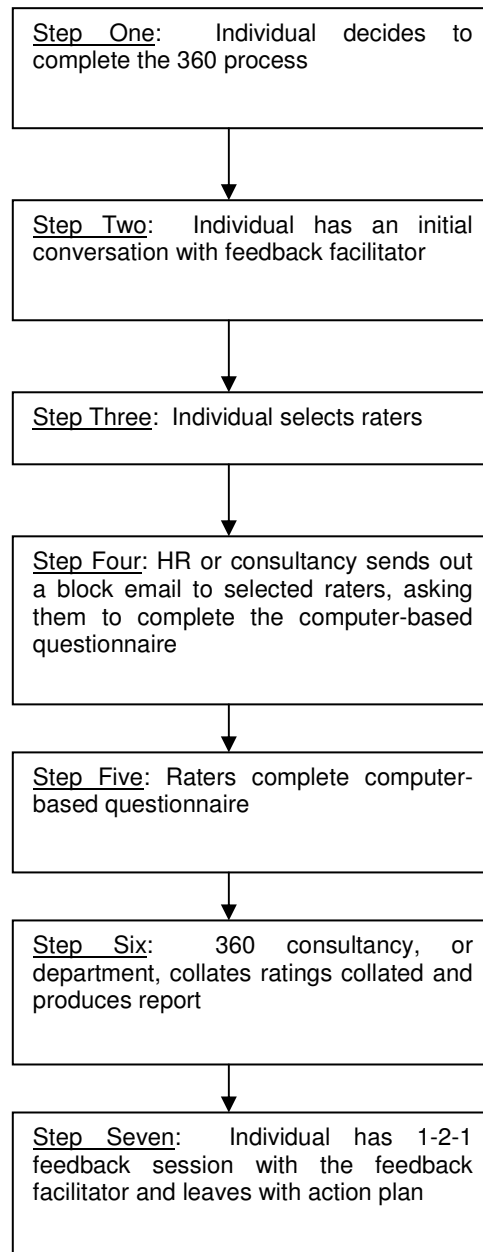


Figure 1: Typical steps for an individual completing a 360-degree feedback process

Step 4

At times, raters only receive an automated request to participate. However, the individual should be encouraged at least to email their chosen raters asking for their input. Beyond this, the individual may also be encouraged to talk with each rater, letting them know:

- Why the individual has chosen them;
- What the individual's objectives are for completing the 360; and
- What specific feedback the individual would value.

Step 5

The raters complete the questionnaire, usually on computer. Processes vary in terms of the degree to which qualitative commentary is encouraged. In the weakest designs, the raters' active engagement with the process is limited to completing the questionnaire. In the strongest designs, the raters complete the questionnaire with the individual's objectives clearly in their minds.

Step 6

The report is produced.

Step 7

In some, but not all, 360 designs there is a one-to-one feedback session with a trained internal or external facilitator. In some designs, the individual selects their own facilitator. The length and number of feedback sessions will vary. At times, the session will focus only on making sense of the feedback. However, there is an expectation in most 360 designs that the individual will set goals and leave with an action plan.

2.2 The organisation's perspective

Best Practice Guidelines (Farrell et al) suggest that an organisation needs to go through the following stages in designing and implementing a 360° process.

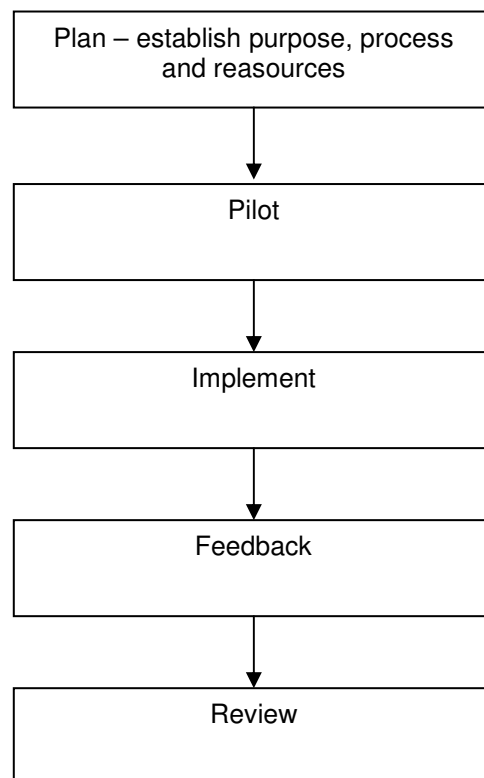


Figure 2: A process for introducing a 360-degree feedback system

2.2.1 Planning

- Ensure the organisational culture supports the introduction of 360-degree feedback;
- Establish the purpose – make sure everyone knows how the data will be used (eg developmental, career movements or salary decisions);
- Make sure that the senior team determine the business benefits and behavioural changes that are expected from 360 – and publicise these;
- Define the indicators – specific behaviours or values to be rated (using either a generic competency framework, the organisation's own competency framework, or a list of criteria that reflect the organisation's values); and
- Involve line managers and team members in the design of 360 – 'A 360-degree feedback program is doomed if HR is its only champion' (Silverman et al, 2005).

2.2.2 Piloting

Given the substantial investment involved in establishing 360° feedback, it is clearly important to pilot any process before full implementation.

- Are the organisational-level objectives being addressed?
- What is the feedback from raters, feedback facilitators, participants and their line managers in terms of communication before and after the feedback session?
- What training, briefing and other preparation has proved useful and how can this be improved – for raters, feedback facilitators, participants and their line managers?
- What technical improvements have been suggested?

2.2.3 Implementation

Typically, a 360 process will be available via the HR department or via the organisation's intranet. The process will be activated by individuals. Demand may fluctuate during the year, maybe increasing in the run-up to assessment centres or during major development programmes. There are a number of logistical issues to consider here:

- What is the process for matching facilitators to participants?
- What are the deadlines and how are these communicated, maintained and monitored?
- What help-line support is available?
- How is the experience and progress of the participants, facilitators and raters monitored?
- What are the responsibilities of the different stakeholders?

2.2.4 Feedback

- What are the goals of the feedback (eg to make sense of the data, to identify key strengths and development needs, to produce a full development plan)?
- How many formal sessions are included in the process (eg one or more sessions with a feedback facilitator, session(s) with a coach)?
- Who has access to the report? How many copies of the report are there?
- How is the data logged, if at all?

2.2.5 Review

- How is the progress of each individual monitored – to measure how effective 360 has been in changing behaviour?
- How is the effectiveness of 360 reviewed at the organisational level? Are the organisational objectives being met?
- What are the mechanisms for making improvements to the process?

2.3 Impact of 360-degree feedback

From the above, it is clear that considerable attention and thought needs to be given to each stage of the process, both at individual and organisational levels.

As a result of this concentrated effort, 360 offers opportunities for all stakeholders to build their awareness of feedback know-how:

- Internal facilitators are trained and gain experience in giving feedback;
- Raters gain experience in anchoring their feedback to the organisation's competencies and targeted behaviours;
- Participants are assisted to make sense of feedback and to process their own reactions to it; and
- Trainers and coaches can incorporate use of 360 into programmes, building awareness and skills in seeking and using feedback.

3 THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO 360-DEGREE FEEDBACK

There is a substantial literature on this topic, both academic and practical. This programme focuses on just a few of the many areas that have been researched, as areas that also offer insight to the improvement of skills in face-to-face feedback:

- Development of a generic feedback model;
- Anonymity and accountability;
- Choice of raters; and
- Subjectivity vs objectivity – the use of numbers.

3.1 Development of a generic feedback model

Smither et al (2005) make the valid comment that, despite the huge amount of research in the area of 360, there has been no systematic ordering or structuring of the wide-ranging interests. Their proposed model focuses on performance improvement as the objective for 360. As can be seen below, they describe factors that contribute to achieving this goal.

3.1.1 Characteristics of feedback

Two focuses for academic research have been: the different characteristics of positive and negative feedback; and the difference between self- and other-ratings.

Important also is the focus of the feedback in terms of its relationship to organisational messages. The most frequent structure of 360 tends to be based on the organisation's own competency framework. This adds weight to messages about what kinds of behaviours the organisation values. And the message is further strengthened with consistent use of the same competency framework across 360, appraisals, assessment centres, customer surveys, employee attitude surveys and development programmes.

A clear strategic focus will also increase the power of the feedback. If the competency framework has been built with the input of senior management, there should be an expectation at senior levels that certain behaviours will help improve individual and company performance.

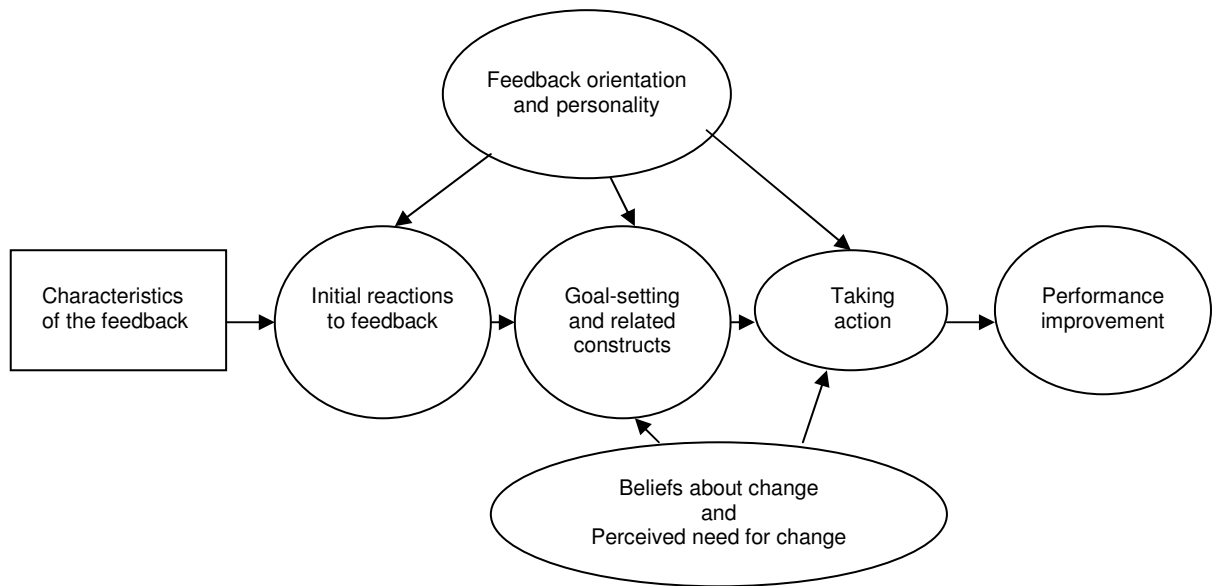


Figure 3
Theoretical model for understanding performance improvement following 360-degree feedback
(Smither et al 2005: 14)

3.1.2 Feedback orientation and personality

People who are predisposed to seek and use feedback will be more open to feedback messages. They are more likely to be interested in continuous learning and will want to gather feedback to assist them in monitoring the progress of projects and their own contribution to those projects.

Various studies have examined personality factors and their influence on the 360 process. People who use feedback effectively are more likely to be:

- Conscientious, demonstrating commitment to following up their action plan;
- Extrovert, willing to engage in open discussion with the facilitator and to follow up discussions with their raters;
- Open to new experiences, wanting to learn and understand new ideas and therefore feedback from different sources;
- Adaptable and flexible, willing to change their style and approach in response to others' views; and

- Emotionally stable and able to handle their own and others' emotional reactions that may be contained within the content of the feedback as well as in its delivery.

However, Atwater and Brett 2003 concluded that personality was less a factor than attitude to feedback.

360 is usually offered as a development tool for individuals. It is interesting, therefore, that there is so little attention given to whether or not 360 is an appropriate tool that meets the preferences and learning styles of each individual. Indeed, it may increase effectiveness of the organisation's use of 360 if there were an examination of the fit, or lack of fit, of a 360 approach to an individual's feedback orientation and personality. Such an examination could be used to help an individual decide whether or not 360 is relevant. Furthermore, it could lead to a wider discussion about how individual differences impact on how people deal with other forms of feedback such as team feedback on project reviews as well as informal and individual feedback.

3.1.3 *Initial reactions to feedback*

Immediate reactions to feedback have longer-term impact on behaviour. More important than the balance of negative and positive feedback is the way that an individual reacts to the feedback. If they experience feedback as a threat to their self-esteem, they are unlikely to set goals and action them. Emotional responses to feedback can include anger and discouragement. These responses will be connected to a person's feedback orientation and beliefs about change. In addition, however, there are opportunities for a facilitator to assist an individual work through initial emotional responses. The likelihood of someone committing to personal action is greater if they can leave the feedback having 'processed' any negative emotional reactions they experienced.

3.1.4 *Goal-setting*

Feedback alone does not lead to performance improvement. Goal-setting is critical. Interestingly, there are some 360 processes which fail to emphasise this aspect. In part this is due to the fact that a facilitator may only be allocated one or two hours to go through the report with the individual. Reports can tend to be long with a lot of graphs. As a result, the entire feedback session may be taken up with making sense of the feedback, identifying themes and homing in on key development messages. Additional developmental support may be needed to take forward those messages to the goal-setting stage.

It is commonly accepted that facilitated feedback offers benefits to the whole process. However, Smither et al (2005) compared earlier studies which included the use of a facilitator with studies that did not mention use of a facilitator – and found no significant effect with the addition of a facilitator.

There are few research studies that focus on the goal-setting stage of 360.

3.1.5 *Beliefs about change*

The developmental objective of 360 is to achieve performance improvement. However, there are a number of beliefs about change that influence an individual's readiness to set meaningful goals and take action on them:

- Self-efficacy – a belief that they are able to learn. Bandura (1986) showed that self-esteem is related to self-efficacy, and it provides an important platform for learning and change;
- Implicit personality theory – this refers to what an individual believes about personality. If they believe that personality is largely fixed ('entity personality theory'), then change will be seen as impossible or as requiring too much effort. If they believe that personality

factors are malleable and that they can be at least slightly altered one step at a time ('incremental personality theory'), then change will be seen as possible; and

- Organisation cynicism may lead an individual to believe that there is no point in attempting to make any real change, and that the organisation has no real commitment to change. Where there is an expectation to go through the 360 process, individuals may do so cynically in order to create a positive impression.

3.1.6 Beliefs about need for change

In order to commit to performance improvement goals, the need for change has to be clear. An individual has to believe there is a need to change.

When individuals receive unfavourable feedback, or where their self-ratings are higher than other-ratings, the results present a need to change. Several research studies (quoted in Smither 2005) show that when an unfavourable gap in ratings appears, thereby communicating a need to change, individuals tend to improve more than others.

3.1.7 Taking action

Taking action has been shown to be linked to a number of factors:

- The existence of a feedback-rich culture which incorporates feedback and monitoring in its regular activities;
- The availability of systematic coaching. Luthans and Petersons' study of 20 managers (2003) showed that coaching helped individuals set more specific goals following 360 as well as encouraging them to solicit more development ideas from their supervisors;
- Perceived and actual social pressure to take part in development activities; and
- Rewards and benefits for development.

3.2 Anonymity and accountability

Anonymity for raters is accepted as being an integral characteristic of 360 feedback. This means that the feedback recipient does not know exactly which individual gave them which rating – although this does not prevent them guessing.

Anonymity is relevant in an environment where people cannot trust or be trusted to take an open and relaxed approach to feedback. And, clearly, anonymity is indeed relevant and necessary in many organisations.

However, anonymity also allows individuals to avoid accountability. That is, there is no requirement for the raters to assist the individual to make sense of the feedback, to explore it or to take forward development based on it (Antonioni 1994; London 1997).

Some people might take the view that feedback to a colleague is essentially about voicing a commitment to building a more effective working relationship with that colleague. The timing, detail and specificity of feedback all reflect a view about the intentions of one individual to another about expectations for that relationship. In contrast, anonymous feedback allows raters to step back from any ongoing contribution to their colleague's development and performance. There are, of course, examples of 360 programmes which incorporate ongoing discussions between the individual and their colleagues as a core characteristic of the design. Indeed, it is by enhancing this characteristic that 360 feedback can be meshed with more regular and frequent feedback activities within the work team.

The availability of training in feedback skills may help raters be more likely to take accountability for their feedback. And willingness to take accountability will reduce the need to rely on anonymity.

3.3 Choice of raters

Some organisations invite the individual to select their raters. Some organisations expect the line manager to be involved. In part, this decision relates to the purpose of 360. If the tool is entirely developmental, then the arguments are strong for the individual to select the raters (Becton and Schraeder 2004). If the tool is for assessment (eg for salary, promotion), then arguments strengthen for the involvement of the line manager or others.

The individual may benefit from some guidance in choosing their raters:

- What are their objectives – and which raters could help them meet these?
- What level of risk do they want to operate – in terms of tackling any relationships where there are difficulties?

3.4 Subjectivity vs objectivity – the use of numbers

360 feedback relies on numerical ratings, that are averaged at least within each rater group. The implication is that the use of numbers renders in the feedback being objective, or at least more objective, than qualitative feedback.

Is this helpful to people's ongoing development? That is, to what extent does it assist individuals to make further use of feedback if they adopt the idea that numerically rated judgements are more objective and therefore more accurate and relevant?

The issues of validity and reliability are central here. Research shows that raters operate with different standards and different understandings of the criteria, when they are rating a participant's performance (Brutus et al 1999). This is problematic for a 360 tool that purports to be objective and anchored on specific behaviours (Hurley 1998). Indeed, different raters could be rating in very different, even contradictory, ways. However, rather than highlight and explain these differences, reports and graphs of 360-degree feedback tend to obscure them. Instead, 360 reports provide averaged ratings. Such averaging presents 'a more uniform message' and is thereby deemed to increase the 'meaningfulness' of the ratings (ibid: 690). The underlying rationale is that the more raters who contribute to the feedback, the more objective the ratings become. This rationale is challenged by van der Heijden and Nijhof (2004) who argue that as 'assessment occurs "in the head", it is always, necessarily, and by definition, subjective' (p 493). They quote Stewart (1998), listing (on page 494) three problems with the idea that 360-degree feedback increases objectivity:

- Assessment always occurs 'in the head', and is therefore subjective. However, most people feel comfortable with the idea of a continuum between subjectivity and objectivity. To have a continuum, which by definition is bipolar, both poles must be possible. But if assessment always occurs in the head, and is therefore subjective, the objective pole of the continuum is not possible. They argue that judgements of 'more or less subjectivity or objectivity are in fact impossible';
- 'Involving other people in the rating process to ensure fairness and consistency is based on the idea that subjectivity + subjectivity + subjectivity = objectivity. However, if one rater can be unfair and inconsistent, so can another'; and
- The third problem relates to the assumption that raters share a common understanding of the criteria. The same criterion may be understood differently by different individuals, and

by different groupings of individuals. Certainly, there is no guidance or training offered to 360-degree raters to ensure a comparable interpretation of the criteria.

A further issue to consider that is connected with the 'objectivity' of 360 is the degree to which raters and feedback recipients can stay engaged over any period of time with that approach. A study by the Institute for Employment (Silverman 2005) showed that raters experienced decreasing levels of interest and involvement in completing 360 feedback questionnaires, over a period of time. In organisations where 360 is a popular tool, individuals may be asked to complete several questionnaires in the course of year. The indications are that raters become less focused and operate more 'on automatic', the more questionnaires they complete. It is true that questionnaires may take only 15 minutes or so to fill out, and therefore may not place high demands on raters in terms of time requirement. However, it may be necessary for continued engagement for raters to have higher, not lower, demands placed on them. That is, there may be benefits to be gained by increasing their accountability and real involvement in assisting colleagues to improve their performance. And this involvement is unlikely to be numbers-based. Certainly, it will be about drawing more on their personal perceptions, and indeed subjective views of the feedback recipient. Enhancing the quality of face-to-face feedback is one way of achieving this.

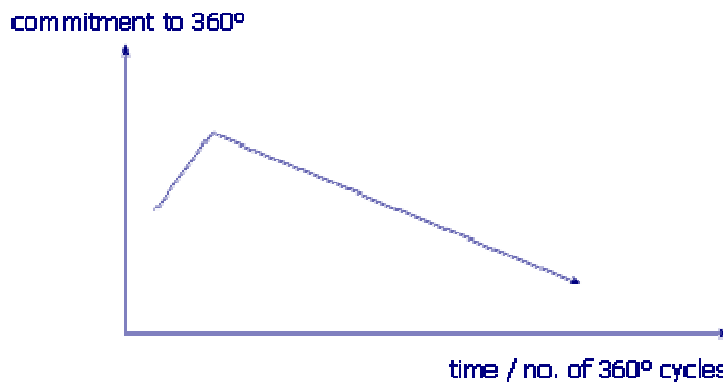


Figure 4 – Commitment to 360 over a number of repetitions. Source: Silverman 2005

4 WHAT IS F2F 360?

F2F 360, that is face-to-face 360-degree feedback, is a tool that encourages dynamic feedback. There are no forms, no paperwork to complete. There is no requirement for an individual to cover specific areas or competencies. Instead, F2F 360 is about learning. Learning how to plan for feedback and how to make sense of feedback.

The following sections cover some of the aspects of F2F 360. They show that F2F 360:

- Is about skill-building – for everyone involved;
- Improves customer-facing attitudes and skills;
- Improves use of feedback with colleagues;
- Encourages a feedback culture;
- Develops leadership through listening;
- Places the recipient in charge;
- Can be used as a follow-up to computer-based 360;

- Focuses on verbal feedback, rather than numbers, and therefore provides a useful companion to computer-based 360, or (for those that prefer verbal feedback) possibly a preferable option; and
- Takes account of the fact that all feedback is subjective.

4.1 What's the purpose of doing a 360 face-to-face?

F2F 360 can be used to meet a range of purposes, including:

- To encourage greater initiative in seeking direct, face-to-face feedback from customers and thereby improve customer service;
- To implement, practise and improve the skills of giving and receiving feedback in a group situation with real work colleagues;
- To build leadership skills in listening, understanding others' preferences for style and expanding a range of styles to meet different needs; and
- To encourage an organisational culture which is passionate about seeking out, and acting on, feedback.

F2F 360 should not be used as tool to determine remuneration, nor as a tool to handle difficult situations.

Why?

Because openness is unlikely if remuneration is at stake. And because the chances are that if you are faced with a difficult situation which you don't know how to resolve, then feedback skills are probably not strong, and not likely to improve if practised in a tense environment.

4.2 What are the benefits of F2F 360?

There are a number of these including:

4.2.1 *The recipient of feedback leads the way*

The focal person carries the responsibility for setting the tone of the meeting, and for determining the level of detail and openness they want to encourage. By virtue of giving self-feedback at the outset, and posing specific questions, the focal person guides the group to address the areas they most value. As they guide the group, they gain a certain measure of control in terms of understanding how to steer the discussion onto areas they value. This is useful for the longer-term practice of actively seeking feedback. Indeed, by ensuring that the focal person carries the responsibility for feedback, we more accurately reflect the working situation. Generally, an individual needs to use their own initiative to seek out feedback. Furthermore, if you want quality feedback during your working day, you usually need to lead the way with very specific questions. Therefore, in F2F 360, the recipient of feedback can practise the skills necessary in their working life by taking the lead.

Some might say that if the recipient leads the way, then there is little chance to drive home harder-hitting messages.

This process is developmental. It is about assisting the individual to grow their own skills in seeking, receiving and using feedback. It is about assisting the individual to adopt a more inquisitive and open attitude about feedback. As such, it is important that they determine the pace.

The process is not therefore put forward as being objective, or as being useful for assessment. (Although, of course, F2F 360 could be adapted for this.)

4.2.2 A skilled facilitator helps the group to articulate and meet their objectives

On leaving a F2F 360, everyone needs to know that there was some genuine purpose and benefit to their involvement. A skilled facilitator will help the group to articulate objectives at the outset and will ensure that everyone gains from the experience.

4.2.3 Participants strengthen their relationships through sharing feedback

Giving and receiving feedback is about strengthening relationships. Indeed, we recognise that feedback is essential to any learning cycle. Therefore, in learning about each other and about each other's needs, giving and receiving feedback is essential. During the session, participants are engaged in listening in depth to feedback, checking each others' understanding of the key messages and working together to identify preferred alternatives. For both the focal person and the other participants, experiencing a F2F 360 encourages further interest in others' views and a greater confidence in building joint solutions.

4.2.4 Everyone develops advanced feedback skills

F2F 360 operates as a powerful learning environment where all the participants grow their feedback skills.

The focal person grows their skills in receiving feedback through:

- Careful preparation of their self-feedback with the facilitator. The preparation ensures that the focal person is highlighting the issues they genuinely want feedback on. This careful preparation emphasises that preparing to gather feedback is an active process and that it is not sufficient to ask, 'So what did you think of that? I am open to feedback';
- Thinking about who they want to attend the session and why. Choices about who attends will develop over a number of these sessions. People become more curious and more open as they experience the power and value of structured feedback;
- Asking questions of the group both at the outset and also on first hearing of the feedback. The individual learns the importance of how they phrase questions: which questions deliver the kind of information they are looking for;
- Recapping to check understanding. Having listened to the group's feedback, the focal person needs to demonstrate understanding by detailed recapping. This is a key skill in receiving feedback;
- Demonstrating that they are making sense of the feedback and linking it to practical actions. Colleagues who have invested time in giving feedback want to know that their effort is worthwhile. The first step here is to witness the focal person making sense of what they have heard and then to commit to relevant actions; and
- Working on a development plan with the facilitator. The facilitator helps the focal person review the feedback and then to form a development plan. It is this process of making sense of the feedback that is critical for moving forward.

The other participants grow their skills in giving and receiving feedback through:

- Observing and learning from the example of the focal person. It is often inspiring to see a colleague be open to feedback;
- Listening to the self-feedback delivered by the focal person, and then linking their own feedback in an appropriate way. The facilitator ensures that the participants tune in to the

kind of feedback that the focal person has requested. Calibrating feedback so that it has most chance of being heard is an important skill in feedback; and

- Preparing feedback. Having the chance to discuss and prepare feedback is often a luxury. Here, it is a key part of the process and participants gain insights into how they might best plan for other feedback situations.

Everyone in the F2F 360 group, therefore, stands to gain from the experience in terms of developing their own skills. Here is a check-list of some of those skills:

- Listening;
- Asking focusing questions;
- Preparing and delivering self-feedback;
- Preparing feedback as a group;
- Identifying developmental suggestions;
- Understanding how the impact of our behaviour is different with different people;
- Being specific about feedback rather than generalising;
- Taking initiative and setting the scene for feedback; and
- Calibrating feedback.

4.2.5 There is an emphasis on encouraging a feedback culture

In addition to building the feedback skills of all involved, F2F 360 can also encourage a more direct, active and dynamic approach to feedback – where people will become more interested in having informative and in-depth discussions with customers about service.

4.3 We already have a computer-based 360. Why would we want to add a F2F 360?

Computer 360-degree feedback is excellent in that it:

- Ensures the inclusion of a number, and range, of people in a relatively simple way logistically speaking;
- Requires only a small investment of time on the part of those giving feedback;
- Includes, usually, a one-to-one session with a skilled facilitator who helps the individual make best use of the report;
- Enables year-on-year comparisons of performance; and
- Focuses on the organisation's competency framework and therefore highlights the behaviours expected of the individual.

Computer 360-degree feedback systems also offer a good springboard to start someone's interest in feedback. People often become inquisitive after their 360 report, wanting to understand more about why people have made particular comments, what particular events they had in mind and what, specifically, those same people would like to see changed.

F2F 360 offers the opportunity to use the written report as a starting point and then to understand more about how people see you.

Furthermore, F2F 360 encourages skill-building and can directly enhance relationships through the immediacy of its approach.

Ideally, organisations stand to benefit from transferring learning between different approaches. For example, some people learn from doing a computer-based 360 in terms of:

- Noticing which qualitative feedback comments hold most value for them and why that might be. As a result, they decide to follow the example of those giving the highest value comments, when they themselves give feedback, including face-to-face feedback; and
- Noticing how comments from different groups compare or are similar. As a result, they construct theories about why people view them in particular ways. Understanding that people 'build theories' about the feedback they receive is a useful learning point that could be used to good effect in face-to-face situations.

Some people learn from doing a F2F 360 in terms of:

- Understanding how people generalise from one situation and how the generalisation needs to be considered carefully, and possibly questioned, when receiving feedback. As a result, they can transfer that learning to when they receive computer-based feedback, understanding better how to read the summaries; and
- Becoming more relaxed in receiving feedback from a range of people. As a result, they may widen the pool of people they draw on for computer-based 360.

4.4 Approaches to research

We all have our preferred methods of researching ideas and of checking out causes and effects:

- Some of us like to describe the different options first, and then work out how to count the frequency of those options actually happening;
- Others like to count first and then consider what the meaning of those numbers might be;
- Some like to only describe in words; and
- Others like to only describe in numbers.

Your preferred approach will affect your attitude to 360-degree feedback. There is not one best method. There will however be a method, or mix of methods, that you warm towards more immediately.

4.5 All feedback is subjective

The power of feedback is that it is subjective.

It may be possible for people to agree that an individual did actually exhibit a particular behaviour a certain number of times during a particular meeting. However, for some of those people, that behaviour may be a major source of complaint, whereas for others the same behaviour may be hardly worth noting.

Indeed, it could be argued that the feedback we receive tells us more about the giver of the feedback than about the object of the feedback. What impresses or upsets one person may go unnoticed by another. This, in fact, is part of the value of feedback. By listening carefully, we come to appreciate the preferences of each person we deal with: what works with them and what doesn't. By inviting feedback we are offering to understand the other person better, so that we can take account of their needs.

It is also true that if one person actually voices a comment, the chances are that at least one other person is thinking the same, or similar. Acknowledging the subjectivity of feedback is not about discounting comments, just because they are not universally held. If we are serious about encouraging diversity, then we need to demonstrate our intentions by being open to feedback, including when there is a minority of one person telling us something different from everyone else.

What is important here is to develop a better understanding of the impact of our behaviour on different people.

And each person is different.

5 ISSUES FOR RESEARCHERS

Researchers have identified a number of areas where there is a lack of understanding that warrant further exploration. Some of these are listed below in the form of research questions:

- What methods can be used to reduce the negative reactions that may come from low ratings, or ratings that are lower than self-ratings? (Atwater and Brett 2005);
- How does the approach to 360 feedback vary across sectors? Specifically, how do differences in culture, context and other organisational characteristics impact on expected outcomes, processes and attitudes? (Brutus et al 1998);
- What are the effects of 360-degree feedback on carrying out development goals and long-term behavioural change (ie the effects of 360 beyond the goal-setting stage)? (Brutus et al 1999);
- To what extent can research findings about 360-degree feedback be generalised across cultures (that is, across ethnic and socio-economic groupings both within the USA, Europe as well as internationally) (Buttner et al 1999);
- What factors contribute to the achievement of organisational-level goals in using 360 – eg history of feedback prior to using 360, the presence of other forms of direct and indirect feedback, rater and facilitator training methods, briefings, methods of evaluating progress in the use of 360? (Hurley 1998);
- What information is needed to assess the readiness of any given company to implement a 360-degree feedback process? (Funderburg and Levy 1997);
- How can the feedback process be sustained? (Church and Bracken 1997); and
- How can 360-degree feedback processes take account of the most appropriate contributions of different raters? That is, which raters are the most appropriate to assess which behaviours? In examining each behaviour that is to be rated, is it equally appropriate to seek feedback from each of the rater groups? (Jackson 2004).

6 ISSUES FOR PRACTITIONERS

This review highlights a number of key questions that need to be addressed when establishing, or reviewing, a 360-degree feedback programme:

- What benefits does the organisation expect to achieve – at organisational, team and individual levels?

- What training and information needs to be made available for participants, line managers/peers/subordinates of participants, feedback facilitators, HR personnel?
- How can the 360 process be used as a springboard to increase the frequency and quality of feedback giving and feedback seeking/receiving?
- How can participants be supported to engage their raters actively in post-360 development planning and implementation?
- How might the organisation use a mix of feedback methods, for example blending computer-based and F2F 360?

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