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Making 360-Degree Feedback Fail - *Ten Ways to Get It Wrong*

By Peter Ward

360-Degree Feedback is now known as a powerful source of performance feedback. There have been success stories. And there have been failures. The technique of 360-degree feedback is deceptively face-valid. It does not have the mystique of other psychometric instruments (personality tests, for example). Because of this HR staff in organisations, or consultants who are new to it, believe that it is pretty straightforward to develop and implement. Well, the good news is that it can be done on a DIY basis. The problem is getting it right. Alongside the many success stories there is a small but disturbing number of instances where matters did not proceed as planned. Is there a common thread here from which we can all learn? On the basis of interviews and projects with some fifty organisations large and small here are the key pitfalls that have to be avoided.

1. Not defining and communicating the purpose of using 360-degree feedback

The technique is used for many purposes including self-development, part of formal training, part of performance appraisal, on development centres, to support a competency approach, to determine pay, and for organisational development. It is probably true to say that the types of questions that are designed and the format in which the feedback appears may not differ too much between these applications. However, the purpose will occasion large differences between the ways in which people are informed of the project, in how respondents are chosen and briefed, who has access to the data, and whether or not it is voluntary.

A public sector organisation implemented 360-degree feedback as a stimulus for self-development. It was so successful that they decided to formalise it as part of their performance appraisal scheme, and also to make it compulsory for all the target population to undergo. They might have got away with changing the goalposts in this manner – simply keeping their options open in the first stage would have helped – but the policy change was not communicated openly. Employees thought that the first stage was merely a softening up process to be followed by the real thing later.

2. Not getting buy-in

Any technique as controversial as 360-degree feedback will not succeed unless the key organsiational levers are pulled. In projects that have gone nowhere it is often because the exercise was the brainchild of one person. If something then happens to that person the project dies with them.

In a leisure products company the HR Manager discovered that 360-degree feedback could add new life to their appraisal system. The technique was implemented successfully at middle management level in one part of the organisation and did indeed make performance appraisal a more meaningful experience. A year later the Manager left and the person who replaced abandoned the technique. Few people other than the instigator knew much about the project. Effectively, it had been introduced and driven by one person in a particular part of the organisation. Their demise meant that the technique died.

The HR Manager of a police force introduced 360-degree feedback as a limited experiment involving some fifteen people. The project was proceeding well until the top man was asked to complete a questionnaire. He cancelled the project, saying that his organization was not ready for it. No attempt had been made to seek his support beforehand.

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3. Poor piloting and validation

These are two separate but interlinking subjects. As I said above, because of the deceptive face validity of proprietary 360-degree feedback questionnaires it is tempting to assume that they are easy to produce. After all, we are trying to measure competence, behaviour and skills. The feedback relates directly to these as opposed to being translated into some other conceptual model, as is the case with most personality tests. It must be easy therefore to write appropriate questions. So why bother with all this long-winded piloting?

In practice it is also easy to write behavioural statements that do not make sense, that describe attributes rather than behaviour, and that are not linked to the competencies they are supposed to describe. I quote from a recent article by Professor Clive Fletcher:

'… my colleagues and I were asked to examine a 360-degree system in a large company that had paid and outside consultant to develop it for them. Wisely, the company ran it as a pilot scheme initially, and then had that scheme assessed. Our evaluation found that:

- *questionnaire items did not relate to the competencies they were supposed to*
- *many of the items were redundant*
- *instead of measuring the broad competencies, the system measured only one*
- *the ratings given (even by the bosses) did not correlate with other performance measures for the target managers concerned.*

As a result of that analysis, we were able to redesign the system and reduce the size of the questionnaire. We were also able to demonstrate that the process covered the competencies it was originally intended to. And in a way that linked with other performance measures.'

Statistical validation of 360-degree feedback instruments is a vexed question. Many of the techniques used to validate personality tests (for example, the one mentioned in the quotation above) rely on large amounts of data to be useful. In practice, with many 360 projects the target population has already been covered before the amount of data available is sufficient to provide useful validation results.

A more practical approach is to be more systematic in how we gain views from participants on the questions' relevance and clarity. It is not difficult to devise methods of content validation, getting opinions from those participating on whether particular questions were unclear, repetitive or irrelevant. Simply analysing how many questions were unanswered tells us something about their value.

4. Not involving those affected

Proper piloting and validation offer the designers the chance to involve in the design process those who will be affected by it. This provides an opportunity not only for gaining valuable feedback, it also increase the buy-in of those who have been consulted. Furthermore, if the piloting and consultation process is then published the rest of the target population will be impressed that these questions were not produced one afternoon by a group of HR people!

During a facilitator training session for one company in the transport sector, the presenters described in detail the way that the instrument had been drafted. This included the way in which focus groups from the population had been run to examine the wording of the questions and the scale, how carefully selected pilot groups had been used, and the amount of revisions that had been done. The group remarked that, had they known of this in advance, they would have come to the training session with a lot more faith in the instrument. The company had done half the job of involvement, but had not taken the final step of publishing the process they had used.

5. Not defining (or following) policies on confidentiality and anonymity.

When participants in a 360-degree feedback project are briefed, here are the most frequently asked questions:

What is behind all this/?

Why are they really doing this?

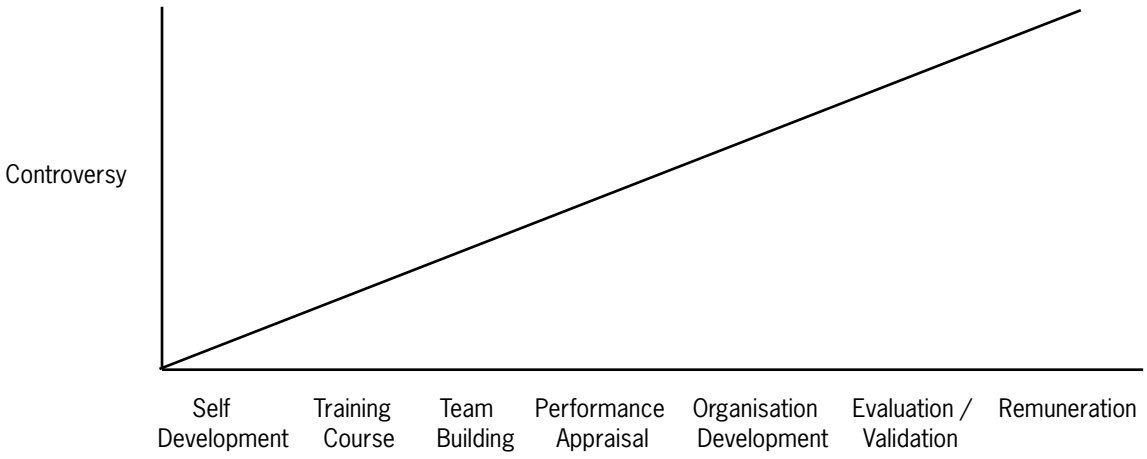
Who will see my report? My Boss? HR? Who in HR? My colleagues? My staff/

What will it be used for?

One wonders how many unspoken questions there are as well.

These are all legitimate questions that demand answers. If people do not feel reassured about confidentiality they may still take part, but how much can their feedback be relied upon if they do not know the answers?

Applications and Controversy



As the above figure shows, as the purpose or application of 360-degree feedback changes, the issues of who owns the information also become greater. They have to be addressed and followed.

Anonymity is somewhat different, although, again, the rules have to be communicated in advance and stuck to. An interesting school of thought has emerged recently that says that anonymity does not always have to be protected, particularly if participation is voluntary. In other words: 'I, the participant, volunteered to take part in this project. It is for my own development and no one else will see the information. I therefore expect you, the person who is going to rate me, also to identify yourself with your answers. I may not like what you say, but I will not criticise you for any adverse feedback.'

This may be a Utopian view, but, whatever the rule, they have to be explained and adhered to.

I once attended a session where the participant wanted to share and clarify his feedback with his team. The team had been told that their answers would remain anonymous. However, he gave the impression, intentionally or not, that he already knew who had said what, and where the adverse comments were coming from. Can you imagine how open the team were then prepared to be when asked to give examples of their views?

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6. Not communicating enough details of the project

Any Human Resources initiative, whether concerned with 360-degree feedback or any other subject, requires careful communication across the organisation. The technique can appear threatening to those experiencing it for the first time. This seems to be true at whatever level in the organisation it is to be introduced. Even senior people can feel exposed. It is probably true that as people move up an organisation, they encounter a diminishing number of people able or willing to give them honest feedback on their performance. For some it may be the first piece of accurate feedback they have had for years. Communicating the rationale for the process is equally important as getting people to understand the detailed mechanics i.e. how to choose respondents, how many, how to administer the questionnaires etc.

An aerospace company wanted to use 360-degree feedback for its top 200 managers as a means of balancing the annual appraisal interview that was based on the achievement of MBO-type objectives. Its communication document is a model of clarity, and contains answers to these questions:

- What is 360-degree feedback?
- Why introduce it here?
- How is it different from other forms of feedback?
- Who is it aimed at?
- Who is involved?
- Can participants chose respondents?
- What does it entail?
- How long will it take?
- Can feedback to traced to individual respondents?
- Who will see my results?
- What will 360-degree feedback be used for?
- How accurate is it?
- What are the benefits to me?

7. Concentrating on technology to the exclusion of other matters

Computer technology is almost an essential part of 360-degree feedback, especially if the latter is to be used on any sort of significant scale. Indeed, computerised scoring has made the spread of the technique possible. Hand entered data led to scannable questionnaire or disks. Paperless systems can be used on intranets, enabling people to complete questionnaires on screen, send them for processing, and receive feedback reports on screen. Action planning formats and development notes can be accessed automatically.

However, the danger is that such issues become so engrossing that the designers spend all their time on the fascinating minutiae of technology, and not enough on the important issues of briefing, facilitation and post assessment support. Starting with techncology as opposed to starting by thinking through your purpose can lead to lost time.

One organisation spent many months in deciding which piece of processing software to use. AS is often the case, This involved lengthy discussions not only with suppliers but also with their own IT department. Eventually the project came to the notice of a newly arrived, senior member of the HR department, who began to ask questions like:

- 'Why are we doing this project?'
- 'What are our aims?'
- 'How will we convince top management about its value?'
- 'How will we communicate to the employees?
- 'What are our timescales?'
- 'How can we best support people after they have received their feedback?'

None of these questions had been addressed before, with the result that the project was able to start only much later than the designers planned.

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8. Making the process of questionnaire completion too complicated?

Long, complex questionnaires give rise to two problems. Firstly, they are time consuming to complete. This can be especially irritating when you have several to complete. Pity the poor Boss who has twelve direct reports, each of whom will receive feedback and for whom he or she has to complete a questionnaire! Secondly, they lead to longer and more complex reports. Consider how many items of information are generated by a 10-competnecy, 100 item, dual-scale questionnaire with four open-end questions. Assuming five respondent groups totaling 17 people that gives us over 3,000 pieces of data plus 68 verbatim comments to read!

The blockbuster questionnaires of the recent past are being replaced by much shorter, simpler documents. It is perfectly possible for people to gain informative, accurate feedback about themselves using only 30-40 simple questions. This is possible by focusing questionnaires on specific aspects of performance e.g. Communicating, or customer service, rather than trying to measure all compentcies. It is also possible to use question libraries from with the participant or their boss can choose what aspects shall be measured.

A manufacturing company has designed a feedback process for its 10,000 employees in which a 30-item electronic questionnaire is used. Some of the questions are fixed, but for others the participant may choose from a larger bank of questions.

Let us not forget that instructions on how to complete the questionnaire, how to choose respondents, where to send it and so on also need to be crystal clear. This can only be achieved by making the instruction subject to the piloting process as well.

If someone can misunderstand written instructions, they will!

9. Making unrealistic project plans

Applying the same law: If a project can go wrong it will.

It is easy to underestimate the time required for each stage of a 360-degree project. In addition to the usual events that be-devil such projects (changes of key personnel, organisation changes, and timetable clashes with other projects) there are others lying in for the unwary or over-optimistic project manager:

The organisation decides to re-examine the competency framework

The initial group who are asked for feedback on the first draft of a questionnaire insist on re-writing it in committee

There are difficulties getting pilot groups together

Questionnaire returns take longer than expected

People are not available to receive facilitation

One company is about to appoint its third project manager in one year. The first one was promoted and the second left the company. All three project managers had/have numerous other duties. This means that they have little time for chasing up the loose ends that inevitably occur, and driving the project through its various stages.

There is no substitute for careful planing in which most of the delay factors are foreseen and allowed for, and the commitment of resources.

10. Not providing support for the individual

If there is one single thing that determines whether a 360-degree project is successful it is the amount and quality of support that the organisation provides for those taking part. Merely receiving your feedback report is not enough to guarantee that you will change. People often say that this technique puts the onus for change and development on the individual. It does, but in order to discharge this the participant has to have available a range of support opportunities provided by the organisation.

Formal activities.
These include specially arranged training events either internal or external to the organisation. They can also include setting up a learning resources centre with a range of learning materials available. Additional materials can be produced, for example a Self-Development Guide contains a treatment of each question with possible interpretations of low or high scores, and tips on what to do differently.

Informal activities
Some organisations set up small groups in which people with the same development needs discuss development ideas. Peer mentoring, where a colleague who you may or may not know well becomes your mentor for a while is also popular, as are performance contracts where the participants undertakes to change their style of operating with a particular respondent group that has identified a problem.

Facilitation or Coaching
Collins' Dictionary defines 'to facilitate' as 'to make Easier' or 'to assist the progress of'. Facilitators are increasing used in the HR and consultancy fields. It is required in many situations where people interact with each other, and the giving and receipt of feedback is such an interaction. Most people need time and assistance to understand their feedback, to accept it, and then to plan what they will do to change. The facilitator's role is to help along all these processes. This can also develop into full-scale coaching where the relationship is more long term and involves examining problems and issues over and above those highlighted by the feedback processes.

Assistance with Feedback Sharing
There is increasing evidence that those people who share their feedback with others are more likely to change their behaviour. There are two reasons for this. Firstly sharing usually includes clarifying feedback and adding to it. The process improves the quality and therefore usefulness of the feedback. Secondly, the act of seeking clarification implies some sort of contract to change. Why else would I seek to know more? The participant with appropriate training can do feedback sharing. Alternatively the facilitator can attend session involving a group or a meeting between two individuals.

A local government authority is seeking to alter the philosophy and style of its top 200 managers by means of strongly supported 360-degree feedback. Support activities include several one-to-one coaching sessions with each individual, group workshop covering common needs, and self-development materials available on the intranet. The programme will last for two years and will end with a re-test of the target population.

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It was perhaps inevitable, with the rapid rise in popularity of 360-degree feedback, that some projects would not go as well as the instigators would like. However, there is enough experience of this technique for the pitfalls to be known and avoided. Perhaps they can be summarised by the following 'do's and don'ts':

- Do spend time deciding the purpose of using it
- Don't change direction without appropriate consultation and communication
- Do get buy-in from influential people in the organisation, even in the early stages
- Don't assume that it will sell itself
- Do spend time and though in appropriate piloting and validation
- Don't put the project at risk through invalid questionnaires
- Do involve those affected
- Don't assume that you know everything
- Do communicate sensitively and in detail
- Don't assume that people already know, or don't need to know. If you don't tell them they will create their own details!
- Do balance technological issues with the other parts of the project
- Don't concentrate on technology in isolation
- Do keep administration and scoring simple
- Don't sacrifice people's co-operation in favour of over-sophistication
- Do make realistic project plans
- Don't take it for granted that project will proceed smoothly and quickly
- Do take the view that 360-degree feedback puts the responsibility for change on the individual
- Don't let them take this responsibility unsupported.

About the author: Peter Ward had held a number of senior human resource management positions in the motor industry and for Tesco's where he introduced the concept of 360-degree feedback in the mid-1980s before setting up Ward Dutton Partnership with John Dutton in 1991. Peter Ward was a founding director of Consulting Tools Ltd.