Fast, Flexible and Affordable
360° Feedback

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Planning and Implementing a 360 Degree Feedback Project

By Peter Ward, author of 360-Degree Feedback published by CIPD

SYNOPSIS

This article sets out some practical ways in which 360° projects can be implemented so that organisations and HR practitioners can make the most of it. This article does not explain what 360° feedback is, nor is it a general treatise on project management. I am assuming that the reader has some previous knowledge or experience in this area.

This article provides a collection of observations, views and ideas based on direct experience of planning and implementing many 360° feedback projects. 360° feedback has some significant differences from other performance measurement techniques and therefore needs to be approached with care and caution. Perhaps the main feature is its power. It provides performance feedback to individuals who may never have had such feedback before, unless it is from their Manager. Because of this it contains surprises which the individual may need help to come to terms with. Anxieties can also be created amongst junior and senior people alike: the results are unknown; they might not be complimentary; people might be exposed to unpleasant realities - or they might not. In this atmosphere of uncertainty individuals and issues have to be treated carefully, otherwise the organisation will not get the best out of the technique, or indeed the whole approach might be rejected. Taking informed decisions on the overall purpose, careful planning, rigorous questionnaire selection or design and disciplined implementation are therefore of immense importance.

FROM AWARENESS TO IMPLEMENTATION

360° Feedback involves four stages of adoption:

Awareness: This comes from reading articles, attending presentations, talking to others etc.

Experimentation: In this stage individuals try it out in a limited way, either on themselves or on a small population. The instruments used for this are either developed internally or generic tools available from suppliers on the open market. The aim is to try out the technique to learn more about it, and to see if it has relevance to the organisation.

Pilot: This is usually the prelude to larger scale implementation, and is intended to test out or “de-bug” a new questionnaire and system.

Rollout: This is where the now proven system is spread to the whole of the population it was intended for.

This article is aimed primarily at those who have already become aware of the technique and may have already experimented with it. Such people are now at a stage where they are contemplating a project.

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PROJECT CYCLE

Of the four stages in the project cycle shown above, the more time and quality thinking which go into the Purpose and Planning stages the more likely the project is to deliver results.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF OUR 360° FEEDBACK PROJECT?

The first lesson to learn about 360° feedback is that it is not an end in itself. 360° feedback is not a solution to performance problems or issues but purely and simply, a measurement device. Like any other good measurement device it can be used in several ways. There are two levels of purpose:

Strategy: What is the main reason for launching into 360° feedback? Is it to reinforce your company values, produce a culture change, create an open management system, change attitudes to performance, or obtain strategic data on which to base other initiatives? If properly used, the technique is capable of facilitating any of these strategies. However, failure to address the question in the first place, and communicate the answer, will lead to confusion.

Tactics: Having decided your overall purpose, you can then work out where the technique will sit in relation to your other HR systems and activities, and the detailed application you intend of it. So, for example, you may use it:

- As part of self-development
- As an element within a formal training structure
- As a means of getting a fix on a particular performance problem
- As a way of introducing competency-based activities (performance development, for example).
- As an aid to career development.
- As part of formal performance appraisal
- As part of a culture change programme
- As a determinant of rewards

Different applications have different implications. For example, as you go down the list above the applications become more "intrusive": in terms of control of the feedback data, and more emotive: there is a world of difference between using 360° appraisal "just" for training and using it to influence the size of bonus payments. Let us say then, that you have worked out what purposes you want to achieve. You now need a sensible plan for how to get there.

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↘ SOME RARELY UNDERSTOOD ISSUES IN PLANNING YOUR 360° FEEDBACK PROJECT

It must first be realised that a complete 360° exercise will take longer than you think; secondly, the feedback process will be somewhat more involved than you imagine.

The Feedback Process

Looking at the feedback process illustrated above, what 360° feedback does is to formalise the natural **observation process (1)**. People observe each other all the time, often unconsciously and unsystematically. They gain impressions, some of which are stored and some of which are forgotten. These perceptions are formed continually in any relationship. The formalisation comes from **briefing your raters (2)** to think about you in a conscious and structured way, usually by completing some form of **questionnaire (3)**. The data obtained is then processed into a **formal report (4)** containing your raters' perceptions expressed in numerical, graphical or narrative form, which is then presented to you as your **feedback (5)**.

The minimum time for these first five stages is often up to two months or longer, and that is after the project has been planned, set up and communicated. This represents the **quickest part** of the feedback loop, and many people may think mistakenly that the job is done when it is completed.

Nothing could be further from the truth. As with any other measurement tool, the issue is what you do with the information once you have got it, and that part of the process does not even start until **(6) Reflection**. Reflection involves several activities including self-analysis by the participant, discussion with a facilitator, a mentor, or the Boss, sharing feedback with others, obtaining clarification on things which came as a surprise or which are unclear. Only when this has been done can the participant convert the data into a meaningful and practical **action plan (7)** which will result in **behaviour change** (8). More time is then needed for the behaviour change to occur and then register with others (forward to Step 1 again).

The whole process, from initial idea to the observation of an improvement in performance, can take up to a year, and if any one stage is neglected, then the results can be disappointing.

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PROJECT CYCLE

Here are the key questions you need to answer when setting up a 360° project:

1. Who will be involved?

Who will be the participants? Is it the whole organisation or a special part of it?

What raters (appraisers) will you use? Manager? Direct reports? Indirect reports? Peers? Team members? Internal customers? External customers? How many of each will be approached? What are the rules for selecting them? Who will be involved in the feedback process and how will it be handled? The Line Manager? An internal facilitator? An external facilitator? How are the reports to be delivered - individually or in a group de-brief?

2. Who will be the Project Manager?

Most 360° feedback exercises of reasonable size need a Project Manager. This person will need to be able to devote time to the project (not necessarily full time), and also be very committed to the process. They will need planning and problem-solving abilities but above all they will need communication, influencing and mediation skills. I have noticed the anxiety that 360° feedback can create at all levels in the organisation. Perhaps this is not surprising in the junior and middle ranks considering today's employment situation. However, for many senior managers the only feedback that they have had in many years has been top down from the Boss, and focused on results or achievements. This is not always useful as a catalyst for behaviour change. 360° feedback therefore can pose something of a threat for these people because it focuses not on **what** a person has achieved but rather on **how** they have achieved it. The feedback comes not only from the usual source but from those on the receiving end of the management style, service, or whatever is being measured. It makes managers more introspective and sensitive to their own shortcomings. I believe the root of this nervousness is not always the prospect of other people in the organisation seeing the feedback data. It even occurs in people who know in advance that they will be the only one to see their report. I think it is basically fear of the unknown or unexpected.

3. What specifically are we going to measure?

360° lends itself very much to the measurement of performance, usually expressed in detailed behavioural terms. In other words it is very useful for measuring how well people do their job, as perceived by others. However, this is rarely the starting point. It is usually advisable to re-visit the strategic purpose for guidance. Thus if this is to reinforce the organisation's values or change the culture, then a detailed description of the values or culture change required should be the starting point for the questionnaire. These statements are then converted into detailed behavioural items, which show what a person will be doing to demonstrate them.

Another starting point is a list of competencies for a particular job or role. Again these can be expressed as more specific behaviours for measurement. Alternatively, standard competency-based tools are also available.

4. What type of questionnaire shall we use?

Once the coverage of the questionnaire has been decided, then the actual design can be considered. Small to medium-sized projects do not necessarily justify the expense and trouble of producing or commissioning a tailor-made questionnaire. There is a selection of well-researched, generic instruments available in the UK from reputable suppliers, and these can represent a quicker or cheaper route. Alternatively, you can decide on something whose coverage and style exactly matched the values or competencies you are measuring.

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4. What type of questionnaire shall we use? (cont.)

Who will be the participants? Is it the whole organisation or a special part of it?

- What should be its length? Experience has led me to believe that in most cases 60 questions are quite enough to assess the key aspects of a person's performance. For specialist uses it can be more or less than this. Many organisations overestimate the ability or willingness of raters to complete a questionnaire, particularly if they have to complete several on different people. A document of daunting length will not help.

- Are the questions written in the appropriate style? In other words will the intended population understand and find them relevant?

- What scales should it use? There are three choices here: between the scale "anchors" e.g. frequency ("never" to "often"), effectiveness ("poor" to "outstanding") and agreement ("strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"); between lengths of scale (usually 5,6,or 10); and the number of scales, for example using two scales enables actual behaviour to be compared with the importance of a behaviour.

- What are the appropriate validation measures? In the case of both generic and customised instruments you will need evidence that steps have been taken to:

  - Ensure that the questionnaire measures what it purports to measure.
  - Check with users that the items make sense.
  - Examine items in terms of ambiguity, verbosity, and relevance.
  - Pilot the instrument and its associated administration procedures before implementation.
  - Gather feedback from the pilot group(s) and revise it based on their comments.
  - Document the validation process.

Further work can be done to:

- Collect data from users to establish norms

- Calculate the Standard Error of Measurement

- Perform a factor analysis to determine how each item loads on the factors or competencies

5. In what way shall we present the feedback data?

Methods of processing and types of report format are many and various. Hand calculation of data can be very slow and laborious for even the shortest of questionnaires, therefore some degree of computerisation is almost inevitable. On-line systems are available to process and present data quickly and clearly. This is available for organisations who wish to do their own processing, whereas some suppliers offer a bureau service to their clients.

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6. Where will the feedback data be kept and who will have access to it?

360° feedback data is more personal than conventional information obtained, for example, from an appraisal system. You therefore need to take some careful decisions about those to whom it will be available. Basically the choices range from nobody to everybody. "Nobody" means that all the data is aggregated for strategic purposes only. Everybody means anyone who wants to see it. Both extremes are unlikely, but here is a list of people who might have an interest: Self, Manager, Manager's Manager, the Board, HR people with a responsibility for personal development, training, performance appraisal, career planning, and remuneration.

7. What timescales should I allow for various parts of the project?

We have already looked at overall timing. Here are some factors which can cause delay:

- Getting everyone signed up in advance
  This can be a long process but is necessary.

- Briefing appraisees and raters
  Many organisations have found that the best way of briefing appraisees is face-to-face at a series of group meetings. However, these can take time to set up.

- Data Collection
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It is also possible to make the participant responsible for chasing up their own raters by devising a simple tracking system to keep up to date on returns.

Another way is to make the process easier by mechanising it in some way. In the UK these methods are in their infancy, but the technology is already available to put questionnaires onto the organisation's network or even to use a push-button telephone system. Problems of confidentiality and anonymity will inevitably be raised, but these can be overcome.

8. What could go wrong?

It is not always easy to identify pitfalls in advance, but experience tells us that some "hiccups" can be avoided through good planning and communication. Here are some which are more likely to occur during a project:

- People get cold feet

This will almost inevitably happen at some stage in the project, usually just before the results are distributed. Those running the project (and their sponsors) need to be ready for this, and prepared to reassure and give assurances on confidentiality and the overall value of the feedback.

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8. What could go wrong? (cont.)

- People react poorly to the results.

360° feedback is very powerful. Inevitably, appraisees do get surprises from the differences between how they see themselves and how others see them. If not properly handled this can lead to rejection of the information, emotional reactions, and conceivably a lowering of morale, and a worsening of performance rather than an improvement. Such issues cannot be left to chance. To avoid them you need to provide careful initial consultation and briefing, a well-designed questionnaire, and first-class, professional debriefing and facilitation. Facilitation on a one-to-one basis is an important but "resource hungry" aspect of a 360° exercise. Some companies prefer the use of outside experts on a comprehensive or selective basis, whereas others prefer the economies of using their own people. Whoever is used, however, must possess the right qualifications.

- Raters "hold back" from providing frank feedback

This can happen where the prevailing mood in an organisation is complacency or cosiness. Two ways to solve this are to encourage the use of raters from outside the appraisee's immediate circle (always assuming that they are in a position to give accurate feedback). Another is to ask the participant's internal or external customers to rate them. Such feedback is often very useful.

Another reason for holding back can be the extreme opposite of a complacency culture - a blame or fear culture. Thus raters might not trust the protestations that they will not be identified and play safe by giving better-than-true feedback.

IMPLEMENTATION

If the stages already mentioned i.e. Deciding Purpose and Planning are covered thoroughly, then the implementation process becomes much more straightforward. The keys to implementation are Communication and Control.

Communication

If the aims of the project are not communicated clearly and up-front, then people will invent their own resulting in damaging rumours and misconceptions. If you have both short term and long term aims, for example to start with 360° on a voluntary self-development basis but eventually to consider whether it should become part of formal, mandatory performance appraisal - then both the long and short term aims need to be communicated.

These messages can be put over by means of presentations, individual meetings, written briefings etc. The main theme though is that the communication needs to be as early and as open as possible. Is there a senior (preferably line management) sponsor? To have a top level manager visibly committed is a powerful way of communicating the importance of the project.

In my experience, when an project has gone less well than we hoped it is invariably because some aspect of communication has been overlooked. Constant clarification and reassurance, and immediate and effective response to problems as they arise are essential if the project is to run smoothly.

Please remember:

- If someone can misunderstand a questionnaire: they will
- If someone can be late in returning it : they will
- If someone can misread instructions: they will
- If someone can misinterpret a feedback report: they will

These problems can only be minimised by careful, constant, thoughtful communication

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Control

"Rolling out" a 360° feedback exercise can be a traumatic experience if certain key principles are not observed:

1. 360° feedback is demanding not only of the participant but also of those who are rating him or her. To avoid questionnaire fatigue, therefore, it is useful to plan the roll out over a period of time, either moving down the organisation or across it. This also spreads the load for those who are despatching and processing questionnaires

2. A large rollout involves large numbers of people; therefore it is possible for the project to lose its way or get our of control. To avoid problems, careful scheduling, together with a good tracking system are essential, as is letting everyone know what their responsibilities are.

AND AFTERWARDS

The final step of our project cycle is "Review". This means:

- Finding out if the exercise has achieved all it set out to.
- If someone can misunderstand a questionnaire: they will

Aggregated data can be useful to the organisation for strategic purposes. Thus, if demographic information has been collected in the first place it is possible to see and compare how specific groups (departments, levels, age bands etc) have performed. It is also possible to review data to determine the main HR priorities in terms of performance development or behaviour change. This can lead to closely targeted actions, and the economical, focused deployment of HR initiatives.

CONCLUSIONS

The growing interest by all types of organisation in experimenting with, and then using 360° appraisal in a variety of applications leads me to believe that it will become a significant tool which line managers and Human Resource specialists use to measure performance. This interest also carries with it a worry, namely that after a peak it will go the way of other new techniques. It is possible to see already the seeds of failure as well as success.

Here are the key issues which will cause 360° to get a bad name:

1. Insufficient attention to any aspect of the feedback loop - particularly not giving participants sufficient support in reflection and action planning, or rewarding them for changed behaviour.

2. Lack of thought and preparedness when implementing 360° projects, particularly underestimating the need for good communication, logistics planning, and facilitation

3. Lack of clarity on the real reasons for carrying out the project, with a consequent inability to measure its true results.

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.