

Introduction

In this article Debbie Hance, chartered occupational psychologist and associate consultant with Head Light Communications identifies key learning points from over ten years experience designing, implementing, interpreting and giving feedback on 360 degree review programmes for a variety of clients in both the public and private sectors.

360 degree review is a process commonly used for gathering feedback about an individual from their peers, and subordinates as well as their manager, and in some cases from customers and suppliers. It promotes greater self-awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses and enables the person being reviewed to focus their development and improve their promotion prospects. The results are also used by some organisations to identify candidates for promotion or inclusion in high potential programmes.

When used well 360 degree review processes provide individuals with highly valuable feedback that they would not normally receive through other methods. When used poorly it can be a laborious 'tick-in-the-box' exercise that generates huge quantities of paperwork, is difficult to analyse and provides very little insight. So how can you ensure you optimise your 360° review process?

Positioning

Get your competency model right

Depending on the size of your organisation, it's worth investing in a bespoke model which really focuses on the things that drive success in your business. Challenge competency frameworks which are out of date, do not discriminate between superior and average performers or do not encompass the skills, knowledge and behaviours which will allow your business to thrive and grow in the future.

Be clear about the purpose

360 is used most effectively when the purpose is clearly developmental; helping the individual to raise their levels of self-awareness and gather feedback that they might not usually receive on a day-to-day basis. It also provides useful information for career development, promotion prospects and talent management. Be very clear about how the results from 360 will be used, who will have access to the results, how anonymous or confidential it is and which processes it might inform.

Align the process to the culture of your organisation

If your culture encourages open communication and shared feedback then you may benefit by implementing an open review (one that does not provide anonymity). Feedback attributed to individuals can be even more powerful as the recipient can develop awareness of how they interact differently with different people, and can have follow-up conversations to discuss the feedback in more depth. Sharing feedback with others in this way is a powerful way of building self-awareness and commitment to change.

Design

Keep it short and sweet

The longer a questionnaire takes to complete, the less likely people will be to complete it and the longer it takes to analyse results and provide feedback. Focus on the key competencies that distinguish between high and low performance in this role, to achieve a balance between having enough questions to provide a reliable assessment, but not so many that it takes more than about 15-20 minutes to complete.

Remove the 'it doesn't apply to me' excuse

Using a bespoke competence model, and focussing on key competencies that are relevant to the role dramatically improves utility, and removes the 'it doesn't really apply to me' excuse, as well as reducing the number of 'not applicable' ratings from the respondents.

Tailor the questionnaire depending on the respondent

When designing the questionnaires, think about who is best placed to comment on the various areas. Direct reports will probably provide accurate and useful feedback on Planning and Performance Management, but how much Strategic Thinking will they see their manager doing? Senior peers could comment on Influencing Skills and Teamwork and but would they know how effective an individual was at Developing People?

Balance qualitative and quantitative questions

Interspersing 'rating' type questions with 'comment' type questions increases the quality of narrative and focuses the feedback provider on specific competencies or behaviours. Think about where the qualitative questions are positioned within the questionnaire. If they are all positioned at the end they are less likely get the attention they deserve.

Prepare to use

Mediate the selection of response groups

Define and mediate a selection process that reduces the likelihood of individuals just picking those who will rate them highly, especially if the data will feed into other processes such as appraisal or promotion. Would feedback from external stakeholders or clients be useful? Could you get feedback from other teams or other parts of the organisation? Who could provide feedback on competencies that you are just starting to use? Who could help you determine whether you've made any progress in developing key competencies?

Balance input; avoid 360 overload

If the 360 degree review is to be anonymous at all levels other than the manager then have at least two people in each respondent group. This means there will be between 7-11 respondents in addition to the self-assessment. Depending on the size of the organisation you need to consider whether there will be issues of 360 overload; people at certain levels or certain positions getting dozens of questionnaires to complete.

Interpret and take action on results

Equip people to receive interpret and take action on feedback

It's common to focus on training managers to be able to facilitate 360 degree feedback, but it's worth also thinking about the support you provide to other individuals who will be giving feedback (peers, direct reports) and to those who will be receiving it. Run briefing sessions or workshops (face-to-face or on-line) with the recipients to help them get the most out of the feedback. Help them with interpretation, how to deal with constructive feedback, what to do with anomalous results, how to discuss it with their manager and how to translate the results into developmental objectives or training plans, and how to monitor progress or measure results.

Don't be tempted to over-simplify the outputs

The most effective 360 degree processes provide a combination of quantitative (scores against competencies) and qualitative feedback (comments on the person's performance, strengths and areas for development). It is common, and useful for management, to produce a short graphical summary, but a 360 degree review process provides very rich data, and this is its strength. Don't be tempted to over simplify the results and rely too much on the summary.

Build on strengths

When using the feedback for development planning with individuals, it is a common practice to focus on filling the gaps and developing against weaknesses, however some gaps might not be 'fillable' and some peoples' strengths can compensate for relative weaknesses. Look at what's realistic and appropriate to the job. Focusing on where the person performs exceptionally, and capitalising on their abilities in this area can be more effective at improving overall performance than adopting a 'deficit' approach.

Demonstrate commitment to individual and organisational development

Use the 360 degree review data to identify the key competencies that will drive success in the business, not only on an individual level, but on a team/unit/organisational level. Look at trends and patterns. The results can inform your training and development strategy to ensure there are structured opportunities for developing these competencies, and over time, can help to demonstrate the impact of such strategies. See our article on building competence in line with business plans.

If you would like to know more, our core team and associates have deep expertise in the definition, design and fulfilment of 360° assessment programmes, **competence frameworks**, in addition to other assessment strategies such as **situational judgement** and psychometric tests. Head Light Communications also has the proven ability to conduct objective **marketplace searches** and evaluations of enabling HR technology, having assisted organisations select **HR Management Systems**, Performance Appraisal tools, **e-learning** courseware and bespoke tools and software. We also have our own portfolio of on-line assessment software in this area, namely **Talent Insight 3.0™** and **Talent Spotter™**.