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A best practice model for the effective deployment of 360° feedback

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The Esso Research group first used upward feedback in 1959 before what we now call 360 feedback became popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Slater and Coyle, 2014). The term “360 feedback” was first used by Edwards and Ewen (1996) and now 90 per cent of all Fortune 500 firms use some form of multi-rater feedback (Maylett, 2009). Despite the widespread use of these tools, there is little conclusive evidence as to their effectiveness. Under different circumstances reports suggest that the use of 360 feedback may be positive, neutral or even detrimental (Seifert *et al.*, 2003).

In this article, I report the outcome of two studies; the first a qualitative study in which I interviewed 59 stakeholders, including seven Learning & Development (L&D) managers, 35 feedback recipients and 17 coaches who worked on those programs. From the first study emerged a best practice model which I then tested with a government organization. The Organizational Development (OD) manager of that organization referred to the best practice model in designing a 360 program and I then spoke to 24 out of 47 people who went through the program which consisted of three feedback/coaching sessions. I interviewed each person three times, following each feedback session. Following the second study, some enhancements were made to the best practice model (Figure 1), which is explained below.

Purpose

Everyone understands that the function of 360 feedback is to help people understand how they are perceived by others and to help them identify possible strengths and weaknesses. What is less clear for many people is why organizations want them to undertake this process. In the first study, I found that L&D managers, participants and coaches all had different understandings as to the underlying purpose of specific 360 programs, including a lack of alignment as to whether or not the results of feedback would be used to measure performance or were intended to be used only for development. A clear purpose provides a context against which the organization can select the right tool, engage stakeholders and frame expected outcomes.

The second study demonstrated how challenging it can be to successfully communicate the purpose of a 360 program. The 360 program formed part of a broader program of works designed to facilitate organizational reform. Many of the activities were only just starting or were yet to start and people weren’t yet aware how all the different programs were related. The senior executive team therefore implemented a series of face-to-face briefings across the organization. These efforts likely contributed to ensuring that everyone understood the data were to be used purely for development and that 60 per cent of stakeholders understood the broader context for the program. Nevertheless, still up to 40 per cent of participants said they didn’t understand the overarching purpose for the program.

This serves to highlight how much effort is involved in aligning an organization around a purpose, particularly when the message may be complex. Employees generally like to hear

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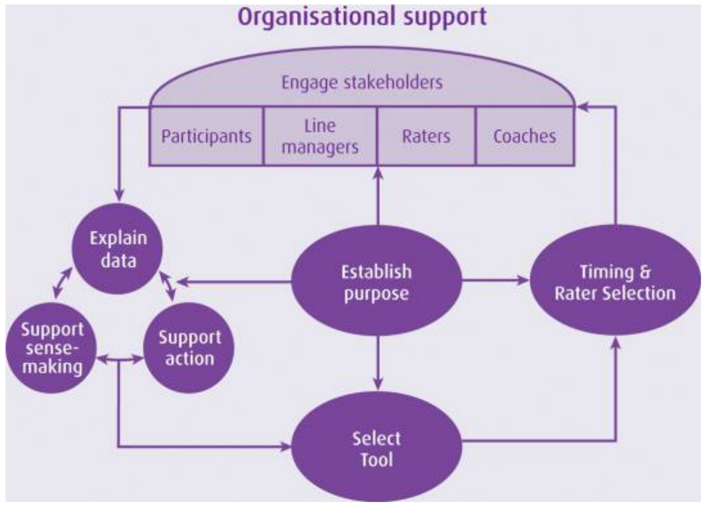
Figure 1 A best practice model for the effective deployment of 360 feedback



the message from their local management because local management is more likely to couch change in terms that can be related to their immediate circumstances (Allen *et al.*, 2007). From this perspective, it is worthwhile noting that some senior managers in the organization didn't feel sufficiently consulted in the dialogue through which it was decided to implement the program. Even more effective dialogic communication of purpose in this case may have further enhanced the effectiveness of the program.

Tool selection

In the second study, we encouraged the organization to choose a tool that best matched their needs. They initially chose a tool called *The Leadership Circle* because it reflected their formative leadership competency framework. The organization was still concerned that the same tool might not work as well for all leaders in the organization including senior executives with previous experience of 360 feedback and more junior leaders with little leadership training and no experience of 360 surveys. The organization ultimately chose to stagger their decision-making such that they were able to collectively learn-through-experience. They rolled out the program first to the executive team and other senior managers and then to the rest of the organization. This provided them with the opportunity to review the suitability of the tool between the two phases of rollout. In the end, a simpler version of *The Leadership Circle* was used in the second phase. The first study also highlighted the importance of choosing a tool with a well-designed report format and of providing qualitative feedback as well as quantitative feedback to help participants make sense of their scores.

Timing

In the first study, lots of people pointed out the risk of "rater fatigue". One interviewee spoke of having six survey requests waiting in his inbox, and another said she had recently received four survey requests in 10 minutes. When people are asked to fill out too many surveys then their answers are likely to be less thoughtful. This risk is compounded when 360 feedback programs are carried out at busy times of the year, such as performance review time or the end of financial year.

Rater selection

In the first study, L&D managers identified as a risk the propensity of some people to choose raters who they thought would provide only positive feedback. Those being rated, on the other hand, identified the risk of choosing raters whose views they didn't respect and were unlikely to respond to. This suggests that program designers need to support those being rated in choosing their raters in accordance with the overarching purpose of the program.

Briefing stakeholders

It is common practice to brief participants by an e-mail. In the first study, we found that briefing people face-to-face led to people feeling better about themselves after the program was complete, presumably because they had the opportunity to engage in dialogue about aspects of the program they didn't immediately understand. Few organizations take the time to brief raters (Atkins and Wood, 2002) which may lead to raters withholding their feedback or using the process inappropriately to vent. In the second study, the organization briefed participants and raters separately and we had no recorded cases of participants being confronted with aggressive or abusive feedback.

Delivering feedback

In the first study, we identified three stages of feedback delivery. The first step is to help the person understand the data. The second step is to help the person come up with personal insights. The third step is to help the person come up with actions. We came across extreme cases where people were sent their feedback report by an e-mail, reports which they didn't understand and so put aside never to be referred to again. If the feedback is delivered by a specialist, someone who knows the tool and is trained to deliver feedback, then the participant is more likely to feel satisfied with the process, more likely to feel good about themself and more likely to take action. These findings are supported by numerous studies showing that feedback is most likely to lead to behavioral change when the process is supported by a skilled practitioner (Overeem *et al.*, 2009).

In the second study, we found that the three stages aren't always linear. While the extent to which people understood their data generally preceded the extent to which they declared insights, which generally preceded the degree to which people said they had clear actions plans, the process is often iterative. People may come up with initial insights and commitments to action based on an incomplete understanding of the data. As they come to understand the report better, new insights and actions emerge. Participants' understanding of the data continued to increase over the seven- to eight-week period studied. It rose, for example, by 33 per cent between the second and third coaching sessions, an increase not fully appreciated by the coaches, who perceived a more significant increase in understanding between sessions one and two.

Some organizations provide people with only one feedback session. Our results suggest that this is unlikely to lead to changes in behavior. The participants we studied had only a very limited sense of what actions they wanted to take after the first coaching session. This rating rose significantly between sessions one and two and again between sessions two and three.

Organizational support

In the second study, although 96 per cent of people said they had taken some form of action after the third coaching session, most participants said that their journey had only just begun. Seventy-five per cent of participants said they would value further support in making changes to their behavior, specifically mentioning coaching, line manager conversations and peer discussions. What all these forms of support have in common is that they are dialogic; forums in which people have the opportunity to *continue* to make sense of original feedback and new feedback, while they simultaneously try out new behaviors in the workplace. Many organizations overlook the value of providing longitudinal support in facilitating ongoing change or else attribute that responsibility solely to line managers, who may or may not fulfill that obligation.

Summary

Seventy-five per cent of participants interviewed in the second study said they felt better about themselves having been through the program, and no one said they felt worse. This compared to 59 per cent and 3 per cent in the first study. Ninety six per cent said they had taken some form of action, which compares to 80 per cent in the first study. These results suggest that the use of the best practice model may enhance the probability that the organization will derive full value from their investment in 360 feedback programs and that such programs will lead to employees feeling more engaged with their organizations. In conclusion, the best practice model emerging from the two studies highlights the value of:

- explaining to participants the purpose of undertaking 360 feedback, with reference to the strategic intent of the organization;
- selecting a tool that is the best fit for purpose;
- conducting the program at a time when participants, line managers and raters all have time to fully participate in the process;
- ensuring that participants choose raters whose views they respect and with whom they interact on a regular basis;
- conducting face-to-face briefings for all stakeholders (participants, line managers, raters and coaches) in which people have the opportunity to ask questions;
- providing participants with the support they require to understand the data, draw personal meaning from the data, decide actions and learn through doing; and
- recognizing that it takes time for people to draw their own conclusions from 360 data and staggering this support over a period of time

Keywords:
Leadership development,
Learning,
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