"Unleashing your power through effective 360 feedback"[1]

What is feedback?

Feedback is input from others. It reflects the perceptions of the people around you about behavior patterns, performance outcomes, competence, ideas, proposals, etc. Whether formal and highly structured or spontaneous and informal, the most useful kind of feedback—and the hardest to accept—focuses on areas needing improvement, about which you were unaware.

Sources: 360-degree multi-source feedback is consolidated input about an aspect of workplace performance that comes from more than one person. This information can come from bosses, coworkers, peers, direct reports and customers.

For individuals: Feedback may be intended for individuals, groups or organizations. Traditionally, feedback for individuals has come in the form of performance appraisals, one-on-one coaching from a supervisor and occasionally informal one-on-one input from coworkers. 360-degree feedback is a systematic way to gather and collect data and comments from a variety of people about specific areas of performance.

Effectiveness: The impact of feedback depends on the skills of the people giving it and receiving it. Effective feedback isn't critical, aggressive or emotional. It describes specific, observable behavior, giving a realistic balance of positive and constructive information. It's timely and focuses only a few issues, so that the person receiving it can do something to improve the behavior

Why is feedback important?

People need feedback. Most people don't see themselves as others see them. For this reason, they often don't understand the impact their actions have on others. They have "blind spots." For example, people don't always know when their work is appreciated, and they aren't always sure when they're causing problems. Even well intentioned and hard-working people rely on ingrained patterns for success. Because they aren't always conscious of what comes naturally, they may be the only ones who don't know that they're adversely affecting the performance of their group.

Performance improvement: Feedback is essential to learning. If people don't fully appreciate their strengths, how can they use them to their advantage? If they aren't

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[1] Adapted from Performance Support Systems, Inc., "Unleashing the Power of Feedback" Copyright © 2006 Performance Support Systems, Inc.

sure how their actions create problems, how will they know what to change, and will they have the motivation to improve?

Motivation: People who take a professional attitude toward their work want feedback. They want to know what's working and what isn't. They want to know if managers are pleased with their performance. They want to contribute to solutions, not be the cause of problems. They don't like having blind spots, and they want to know how to improve. They're willing to invest in themselves to achieve better results, because they know this will increase their value in the career marketplace.

The challenge: As valuable and as desirable as it is, constructive feedback is not a regular occurrence in most workplaces. The two most common reasons:

> • They usually find it uncomfortable to confront each other about performance issues.
> • Most people aren't sure how to give feedback effectively.
> • Very few people like accepting negative feedback.

What is 360-degree feedback?

360-degree feedback is feedback from many sources. It's an efficient, computer-based mechanism for gathering structured, highly objective measurements about areas of individual and group competence from a variety of individuals, such as bosses, customers, peers, coworkers and direct reports.

Survey information is collected anonymously and entered into a computer. Scores are averaged, and the results are reported in a matrix of performance data. The feedback may be quantitative (numerical scores) and qualitative (narrative comments)—much more information than one usually finds in a performance appraisal. People receiving multi-source feedback can focus quickly on strengths and areas for improvement.

The process focuses on observable behaviors that have been validated locally to relate to the workplace. Because it combines scaled ratings from many sources, the data are as fine-tuned, comprehensive, detailed and accurate as measurements of human performance can be. Most 360 systems have extensive safeguards for anonymity and confidentiality. These features assure participants that 360-degree feedback is a safe way to share information that is hard to measure and awkward to communicate.

Where did the idea of 360-degree feedback come from?

The idea of 360-degree feedback for individuals is a relatively new concept. Forty years ago, some assessments experimented with self-ratings compared with ratings from others. These early tools borrowed from a number of traditions.

Peer evaluation. The service academies were among the first to use peer ratings. Along with ratings from tactical officers, cadets received ratings from other cadets in their unit. These ratings were summarized by computer and used for counseling. Decades later, organizations decided that similar practices might work for them.

Personality testing. While 360 feedback describes observable behavior, personality testing focuses on patterns of mind and thought, which are inferred indirectly. Personality testing in organizations began in the fifties and became a popular practice in the seventies. From personality testing, researchers learned the value of giving feedback to individuals in the workforce.

Organizational surveys. A form of multi-source feedback, climate surveys and employee opinion surveys have been in use since the sixties. These tools create feedback about organizations, not individuals. From organizational surveys, researchers discovered how to use computers to collect, analyze and report survey data.

Performance appraisal. Since the fifties, most organizations large enough to have a personnel manager have used some form of performance review. Most appraisals are highly subjective in their formats and are linked to compensation or personnel action. From this history, researchers have validated the usefulness of periodic performance feedback.

The first attempts at 360-degree feedback were designed to show leaders how their self-perceptions differed from the perceptions of direct reports. Building on the above traditions, researchers developed more comprehensive and credible surveys. These were introduced in the 1970s. The first 360 instruments were focused on executive management and leadership. Initially, managers distrusted the concept of direct reports rating them. It seemed strange and threatening. Nevertheless, managers experienced the power of the feedback, and they began seeking input from multiple sources. Today, tools are far more flexible, affordable and easy to use than ever. Once used almost exclusively by larger organizations to develop executives, today they are used by all types of organizations and throughout the workforce to assess a myriad of interpersonal skill areas.

Why is 360-degree feedback considered more effective than single-source feedback?

One person's feedback is rarely enough to convince most people. Whether the message is about strengths or areas for improvement, the feedback recipient often wonders whether one person's opinion is valid.

The most common example in the workplace is that of a supervisor giving feedback to a direct report. Although managers are usually the most responsible, capable and experienced people in their units, it seems that some people don't welcome their feedback. One problem is that most bosses are not in the best position to observe day-to-day behavior. They have a lot to observe, and they often spend a lot of time interacting with higher-level managers.

Further, few managers are skilled at giving constructive feedback. Effective feedback requires a different pattern of communication than the one most people learned while growing up. To be effective, a manager would have to learn special interpersonal skills and exercise the discipline to make a pattern of them. In the busy workplace, most managers don't bother. And when feedback is perceived as criticism, most people are not likely to welcome what a manager has to say.

In addition to day-to-day interpersonal communication, the traditional medium for periodic feedback has been performance appraisal. For many reasons, these formal

evaluations of performance are, at best, tolerated. Appraisal has carried the weight of setting goals and tracking two aspects of performance—the development of competence and the achievement of results. For years, managers and employees everywhere have expressed their dislike of performance appraisal and agree that it hasn't done a very good job at either task.

Peers, coworkers, direct reports and customers usually have more detailed information about how employees do their jobs. Furthermore, these people care deeply about performance issues, because when coworkers don't do their jobs, it affects their work.

Getting feedback from many sources about a specific issue may be desirable, but it's impractical without 360-degree feedback. Because of its structure, thoroughness and anonymity, 360 is much easier to analyze, believe and use than single-source feedback.

What does formal 360-degree feedback provide that spontaneous person-to-person feedback doesn't?

A frequent comment is that if people would just give each other regular feedback, you wouldn't need 360. This mostly valid notion overlooks certain realities of the workplace.

For one thing, effective informal person-to-person feedback is relatively rare in the typical workplace. Most people don't know how to give appropriate feedback. They find it uncomfortable, and they're concerned that what they say won't be well received. Also, they believe that it's the manager's job to handle this responsibility. Furthermore, the daily rush of work usually doesn't permit giving one-on-one feedback the time it needs.

Most of the time, spontaneous verbal feedback isn't delivered in a form that's easy to make sense of. All too often, it's not specific, objective or tactfully communicated. Even in the best case, not all the important areas will be covered. Comments may be given piecemeal. Also, everyday feedback tends to be from only one person, so the recipient might be tempted to question its validity. Consistent feedback from many people is much harder to discount.

Whether printed or saved in a computer file, the structured reports of 360-degree feedback let you review specific aspects of performance when you have the time to reflect on areas of strength and high-priority areas for development. Without this analysis, it wouldn't be realistic to expect much developmental planning or improvement in performance.

Spontaneous, informal feedback about a specific instance is valuable because it's timely and focused on a specific issue. On the other hand, 360-degree feedback is a superior option for diagnosing developmental needs. It systematically surveys a carefully researched set of key behaviors and collects feedback from a variety of sources.

Who are the best sources of 360-degree feedback?

How do others see you? What are their impressions of your work? These perceptions form the core information reported by 360 feedback. Because of the administrative

effort involved, you probably won't seek this kind of input frequently. So when you do, you should seek it from a variety of sources. Ideally, you'll involve people who are familiar with how you go about your work. Four sources are most commonly used.

Managers. Also called leaders, coaches, supervisors or bosses. These are people you look to for empowerment, leadership, coordination, guidance and other forms of support. While they may not be able to observe you all the time, their expectations are important and you'll be wise to discover their perceptions of how well you do your job.

Direct reports. Also called employees, staff or subordinates, these are people who look to managers for leadership, coaching, coordination, and other forms of support. In a real sense, these are the "customers" of leadership. These people are profoundly affected by the qualify of a leader's performance, and they typically have a lot to say about how well that person develops, inspires, empowers and encourages people.

Coworkers. Also called peers, colleagues, associates or team members, these people have the most detailed knowledge of what you do every day. They're probably most interested in your ability to interact with them as a team member.

Customers. Whether external or internal customers, stakeholders or suppliers, these are people who benefit from what you do. They'll be eager to tell you how delighted or how disappointed they are with your services.

How does the 360-degree feedback process work?

Feedback processes vary from setting to setting. A number of structured activities may take place before, during and after assessment.

1. Before Assessment:

• Educate people about 360
• Resolve issues related to 360
• Develop customized competency lists

2. During Assessment:

• Set up a customized assessment project on the software
• Prepare and distribute respondent questionnaires
• Collect and transfer data to the system
• Customize individual reports
• Customize needs assessment reports

3. After Assessment:

• Facilitate feedback sessions
• Facilitate supplemental feedback sessions
• Facilitate planning sessions
• Coach individual development planning

• Incorporate a structured program of follow-up reinforcement: continued learning, ongoing feedback, coaching and accountability

How often should 360-degree feedback be administered?

To be sure, the first administration provides a wealth of revelations about strengths and new areas for improvement—typically more than a person can address in one cycle of development. The feedback is believable, since it comes from many sources; and the narrative comments are often perceived as the most valuable input, since they are more descriptive than numbers can be. Ideally, feedback recipients will focus on one or two high-priority areas for improvement. If their development plans are realistic, and if they implement them, major gains in personal performance can be achieved.

People need time to experiment with new patterns and learn from successes and frustrations. The ideal period between assessments is between nine months and a year. It's enough time to make changes and create new perceptions; yet, it's not so distant in the future that the hard work of behavioral change can be deferred.

The knowledge that a follow-up repeat assessment will be conducted can increase a person's motivation to undertake the difficult challenge of changing ingrained patterns. The people who want to change will welcome a repeat assessment. They'd like to transform weak areas into strengths, and they realize a follow-up assessment will document their progress.

What are the major benefits of 360-degree feedback?

People need feedback, and 360-degree feedback is the most effective way to give them information about hard-to-measure aspects of their performance.

Systematic performance evaluation. Day-to-day, person-to-person feedback is exceedingly valuable. But feedback based on one person's observations is unpredictable, and it's usually focused on only one aspect of performance. 360 lets you ask for and get feedback from many sources about a comprehensive array of closely related workplace behaviors. This input is ideal for individual development planning.

Coworker feedback. Giving effective feedback requires a certain amount of interpersonal skill. Most people are uncomfortable in the feedback role—whether giving positive or constructive feedback—and they're happy to leave this task to managers. Also, most people don't like being negative, and they don't want to risk offending their coworkers. 360-degree feedback gives people a safe vehicle for giving their opinions about another person's work patterns.

Feedback from many sources. Feedback from one source is better than no feedback at all. But even when it's from the boss, it's still one person's opinion. Consistent feedback from many sources is more convincing. Faced with the hard work of changing behavior, people want feedback to be thorough and credible.

Objective, quantified data about "soft" areas of performance. Many important elements of performance are hard to quantify. The most obvious examples are the interpersonal aspects of work, such as leadership, team communication, sales,

service, negotiation and instruction. Because 360 combines scaled measurements from many sources focused on detailed, researched aspects of behavior, the data are highly objective.

Data for individual development planning. The wealth of objective feedback about areas of competence makes it possible to accept the data and focus on priority areas for self-improvement.

Data for needs assessment and HRD planning. The data produced by collecting individual feedback can be aggregated as averages for group and organizational analysis of strengths and weaknesses.

What are the most common concerns about using 360-degree feedback?

Confidentiality. Most people want to give fair and honest feedback, but they don't want to be punished for doing so. If they suspect that people in authority will evaluate their input, they may not want to give honest ratings and comments. Ideally, feedback remains anonymous. Also, the people who receive honest feedback don't want to be punished for receiving it. You will want ratings and comments to be kept confidential. Managers are responsible for coaching employees, but the organization must decide what kind of summary information bosses actually need.

Trust. If people don't trust the process, they'll find it nearly impossible to give honest ratings and comments. They might even withdraw support or try to derail the assessment process. Several aspects of 360-degree feedback require trust. Feedback recipients are likely to learn where they need more development. Who will handle or see this information? How will it be stored? All parties must trust that the system guarantees anonymity and confidentiality. If people are told that detailed information will be given only to those who receive feedback, these promises must be kept. If leaders say that feedback is to be given for developmental purposes only, participants must feel confident that it won't be used later for pay or personnel decisions.

Follow-up. The purpose of 360-degree feedback isn't self-awareness. It's performance improvement. Organizations that use 360 should be prepared to support these developmental activities. 360-degree feedback can identify strengths and areas for improvement, but it doesn't go beyond that. If an organization doesn't follow through with an individual development program that includes opportunities for on-the-job reinforcement, the feedback may have no benefits. Even worse, people may be upset that it was a futile exercise.

What are the most common misconceptions about 360-degree feedback?

"It can fix or replace a flawed performance appraisal system." Managers often conclude that 360 is a high-tech answer to problems with performance appraisal. While 360-degree feedback probably should become part of the solution, it has never been used effectively to manage both performance development (competence) and performance review (results). The main value of 360 feedback is to give individuals information about the process of performance—how their work gets done. It's not the best tool for evaluating performance results—what gets done—which in most cases are quantifiable and better measured by other means.

"It's only for managers and leaders." Twenty or thirty years ago, the first 360s featured a fixed set of measures focused on management or leadership. The primary market was managers in fairly large organizations. In the early 1990s, 360s began to focus on team leadership and team interaction.

"It's a program you do one time." Because 360 used to be so expensive, many organizations didn't think of it as a tool that could be used regularly. In the past, a fair number of managers participated only reluctantly, hoping to get it out of the way. 360-degree feedback is not a program; it's a diagnostic tool. Therefore, it should be administered periodically to track progress and create new priorities for development.