

360 Feedback: The Fundamentals

Overview

360 feedback is a leadership development process in which survey data is collected from various sources (e.g., bosses, peers, subordinates, and self) regarding leaders' competencies. This feedback is compiled into a report which is shared with the focal leaders (the one in the center of the 360 feedback circle) to guide their development.

In order to ensure the best results when creating a 360 feedback process, you should keep the following in mind. First, anonymity is of the utmost importance. In order for other raters to give honest and productive feedback, they should be guaranteed that their data will be collected anonymously. Second, 360 feedback should be used for developmental purposes only. If used for evaluative purposes, some raters may maliciously give poor ratings to others due to "office politics," thereby spoiling the validity of the data and limiting usefulness of the feedback for leadership development. Note that a leadership competency model can be used as a framework to create other instruments for selection and evaluation processes; however, the 360 feedback tool should be used for developmental purposes only. For help creating selection and evaluation tools, LeaderNation can refer a consultant who specializes in this work.

Finally, organizations conducting 360 feedback should understand that by collecting data, there is the expectation that something will be done with this data. It is important to make certain that leaders going through this process understand what will and will not be done with the data, and what actionable steps can be expected following data collection. At a minimum, personal reflection and feedback meetings for leaders who have gone through the process is recommended. Creating action plans is another way the data can be easily used. Meetings with executive coaches, leadership trainings, and other developmental and support activities the organization provides for its leaders may also be useful follow-up activities once data has been collected.

Top Ten Best Practices

1. **360 feedback should use behaviorally-based questions.**

There are two main reasons questions should be behaviorally-based. First, behaviorally-based feedback is imminently actionable. If you were told you didn't have good listening skills, would you know how to improve upon that? If, however, you were told you didn't paraphrase what others said in order to ensure you understood the message conveyed, you would know exactly what to do to improve upon that (i.e., start paraphrasing what other people say). A second reason questions should be behaviorally-based is to maximize the usefulness of the feedback. If a manager is told he doesn't "value his employee's time," he can easily dismiss this as malicious feedback by disgruntled subordinates, or say that other people couldn't know what he feels inside. If, however, he is given the feedback that he

doesn't "set realistic time boundaries," he may be more apt to change his behaviors or engage others in a conversation about "realistic time boundaries" when assigning projects.

2. 360 feedback should be used for developmental purposes, not for evaluation.

While a competency model can and should be used for evaluating the leaders in organizations, the 360 feedback process should be kept separate from the process of evaluation. If 360 feedback is linked to performance evaluation, leaders will become incentivized to enlist raters who they know will give them positive ratings, as opposed to raters who will give them honest feedback. Even if people are not given a choice in who will rate them, mixing 360 feedback with evaluation processes creates other problematic incentives for leaders to: (1) lampoon each other for malicious purposes (such as grudges), (2) form political alliances and agreements ("I'll give you high ratings if you give me high ratings"), or (3) simply rate others lower to look better by comparison.

3. 360 feedback should be based on key leadership competencies.

Your 360 feedback tool should be based on the critical competencies which lead to success. These competencies should also be the basis for selecting, developing, evaluating, and rewarding leaders of an organization. This approach creates both a common understanding of what successful leadership looks like, and a common language to discuss successful leadership. In this way, leaders will know what is expected of them, and know how that is linked to the success of the organization.

4. 360 feedback should be aligned with mission, vision, and strategy.

Powerful leadership competency models are linked to the success of an organization via its mission, vision, and strategy. See our "Ensuring Organizational Results: Connecting Competencies to Mission, Vision, and Strategy" pdf for more information.

5. 360 feedback should lead to opportunities for development.

360 feedback should be coupled with opportunities for professional development such as training, job rotation, and coaching. This supports leaders in becoming better at their jobs, and makes the feedback they receive more actionable.

6. 360 feedback should be reinforced through developmental meetings with managers.

360 feedback should be supported by developmental meetings. Recipients of feedback should have an opportunity to discuss their report with a manager in order to get clarity regarding the feedback they have received.

7. 360 feedback should be paired with coaching.

Leaders are best able to make use of 360 feedback when the process is supported by coaching. Coaching gives the recipient an opportunity to discuss the feedback and create an action plan regarding their leadership development with an objective third party.

8. 360 feedback should involve key stakeholders in the development of the tool (including all employment levels of the organization)

When developing the organization's competency model and 360 feedback process, representatives of each group of people who will be affected by the process should be

involved. This will lead to the creation of a better tool and corresponding developmental process since more participation by stakeholders (1) increases the perceived legitimacy of the tool by the people who will use it, (2) increases participation and acceptance in the developmental process, and (3) leads to the creation of a better tool by identifying competencies that are critical for different groups or levels (e.g., departments, product lines, regions).

9. 360 feedback should have a process that has been clearly communicated and should specify what it is and is not intended to do.

A lack of communication around the 360 feedback process can lead to suspicion, and fantasies about what the process is, what it means, and what it is meant for. Clear and honest communication from the beginning of the process can help quell these concerns and ensure a higher participation rate and more honest, productive feedback.

10. 360 feedback should enable people to give honest feedback

In order to make sure people feel comfortable giving honest feedback, they should be guaranteed that their data will be collected anonymously. In this way, peers and subordinates will be protected from potential negative consequences of giving honest feedback. Anonymity should not necessarily be expected in the case of ratings given by a boss. Certain rater groups, like bosses, should be responsible for “owning” their feedback and should take a more active hand in the professional development of the leaders that report to them.