

## How2 determine whether your organisation is ready for 360 degree feedback

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### Introduction

The three degrees of 360 feedback: giving feedback on management style  
Giving feedback on management style is one of the more difficult tasks of organisational change. For better or worse, changes in mission, organisational structure, pay systems and who gets hired may affect you personally, but the changes are not directly about you. With receiving feedback on your management style, it not only affects you personally, it is personal. It's no wonder that despite its popularity, implementing systems that give feedback on management style must be done with caution given the sensitive nature of the data and the possible defensiveness of the employees who receive it.

### Main

#### Management style, and a summary of 360 feedback

Until the late 1960's, feedback on management style had usually come from the top down. Either as part of a yearly performance appraisal, or after a particularly disastrous event at the company, a manager received feedback from their boss either as 1) part of a heated exchange of views just before the manager was fired or 2) heard vague, uncomfortably said mouthings about improving relations with people.

This started to change with the advent of sensitivity groups, or "T" groups in the 1960's. During these sessions lasting several days, employees from a variety of organisations came together to learn how people felt about each other in a group.

The main focus was on personal growth and development. Because of this focus, employees came back to their workplace intent on acting differently and better towards their fellow employees. Unfortunately, "T" groups were not successful in the long run because managers who came back to the same work environment that either didn't reward such new, more caring behaviours or were overwhelmed by other managers acting the same old way.

In response to this, the various consulting groups and institutes that ran "T" groups began to focus their feedback sessions on work behaviours and management style. Through various exercises, situations and discussions, participant's behaviours were compared to national norms, and received counselling and feedback on how to improve.

Starting in the 1980's, a new wrinkle to this approach was developed. As the idea of increasing employee influence and autonomy ("employee empowerment") became popular, the thought arose that a manager ought to receive management style feedback from more than one source, from those who knew them best: their subordinates, their boss, their peers and themselves. This information was usually gathered via numerical surveys and open-ended questionnaires. This feedback from the entire circle that knew someone became known as "360 feedback."

## **Options for implementation**

There are three options for implementing 360 feedback, each more comprehensive and powerful in promoting change, both organisational and personal:

**1)** Send a few managers to an outside consultancy for assessment and feedback. In this option, managers may hand out a survey to whom they know (and expect to get feedback with minimal negative information) the data collected by the consultancy, and the managers receive an "offsite" training and feedback session with similar managers from different companies. This approach has been derogatively called "sending the fair-haired boys to charm school."

While this approach has its merits, its major deficiency is the same problem that the "T" groups had: a few individuals are changed, the overwhelming mass of management is not, and the systems and processes that encourage old behaviours are still in place.

**2)** The second approach is to bring such a programme "in-house", where many managers receive 360 feedback. In this approach, the feedback can be more systematic for two reasons: a) surveys are handed out to all subordinates and peers rather than those who have been "volunteered" by the person receiving feedback. This tends to reduce "sampling bias" of just giving it to those who might give just good feedback; and b) the implementation of this process can be from the top of the organisation down to the bottom. This has the advantage of allowing upper management to be an example of willingly receiving such feedback and encouraging them to be both models of behaviour and coaches to those underneath them.

**3)** The third approach involves all of the second approach, and also deals with "systems issues." Where 360 feedback alone can only deal with problems caused by individual behaviour, it by itself does nothing for the systemic causes of problems, such as organisational structure, inappropriate and distorted measurement systems, company-wide lack of skills, or performance appraisal and pay problems. 360 feedback can serve both as a catalyst to help management realise the systematic causes of organisational problems, and can be part of the solution, so that management style becomes in harmony with other organisational changes senior management is trying to make.

## **Questions to ask before you start**

A word of caution here: questions about implementing 360 feedback are easy to ask but not so to answer. Often at times, management assumes the answers but do not openly discuss them with the result being much chaos and confusion down the road.

Among these, some of the questions are:

### **How ready is your organisation to handle 360 feedback?**

Often at times, organisations may be willing to pay consultants to assist them in implementing such a system, but the organisation needs to be prepared. At times, "soft skills" training in communication, leadership, management style, meeting management etc. is useful in preparing management. Teambuilding

activities might also be useful, as well as a general organisational climate survey to determine the context of implementation and find any additional issues beyond management style that might be a problem.

**Who needs to agree?**

Who will be the decision-making body about 360 feedback? Will it be the head of the organisation, or Human Resources, or a cross-section of employees from a variety of levels?

**Who will be involved?**

Which employees are to be the focus of the 360 feedback, and who will provide it to them?

**Is this voluntary or mandatory?**

Will some employees be offered the "opportunity" to receive this feedback, will everyone receive it, or will just management receive the feedback?

**What methods and measurements will be used?**

Will employees just fill out numerical surveys, or will this information be supplemented with observations and interviews? Will the report be just a graph, a summary of high need for change survey items, or will there be a written report with recommendations? To what extent will this report be personalised and hand crafted versus being automated?

**To what extent will the data be collected anonymously and/or confidentially?**

While the intent may be to keep the survey data anonymous, if written comments or interview data are also included, the data may have to be altered to avoid making obvious conclusions about who communicated what. In addition, management must answer questions about personal, confidential data that might be accidentally revealed during interviews.

**What will be done with alleged violations of laws, ethics or policies?**

Though this may not be the intent of 360 feedback, on occasion information is gathered that suggests violations of legal, ethical and company codes of conduct. A horrendous example of this with one of our clients several years ago were allegations made that a single woman had become pregnant by a manager and received a promotion to keep her from making a fuss.

**What information will be public?**

At first blush, you might think that all data will be private, but does that mean that one's own supervisor can't see the data and the report? Will group and company averages be made public without them being broken down into individual scores?

**What consequences will there be?**

Will they receive additional coaching and counselling, training, or be terminated or re-assigned? Will the 360 feedback be the sole determiner of this decision?

**What logistics and support will be necessary to make this successful?**

To what extent will the data be collected electronically (via the Web or Intranet) or on paper? What administrative and technical support will be necessary?

**What systems changes will accompany this organisational change?**

As stated before, providing feedback on management style in and of itself can

only be part of organisational change and can rarely stand on its own. As a result, one must ask how and when will 360 feedback be incorporated into training, selection and pay decisions?