

# 360-DEGREE FEEDBACK: GOING AROUND IN CIRCLES?

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Multisource feedback (often called 360-degree feedback) is, in itself, an excellent idea. In practice, though, multisource feedback is often implemented in a way that can do more harm than good. Many commercially available 360-degree feedback programs seem to be poorly designed. They may provide reasonably accurate assessments but are inadequate in their delivery of those assessments. The problem lies primarily in the way they deliver the feedback. In this article, we discuss the problems and offer some remedies.

MULTISOURCE FEEDBACK (often called 360-degree feedback) is, in itself, an excellent idea. There is enormous potential value in knowing how you are viewed by people who have different working relationships with you. In practice, though, multisource feedback is often implemented in a way that can do more harm than good.

So what's wrong with 360-degree feedback? Well, too often it is characterized by one or more of the following problems:

- Overload
- Confounding
- Inaccuracy
- Difficulty of interpretation
- Discouraging impact or defensive response
- Short-lived effect

Apart from those problems, it's a pretty good idea. Feedback followed by the opportunity to practice behaviors allows people to become truly fluent in an activity. People in managerial positions seldom get good feedback on their practices and behavior in the course of their work, so multisource feedback offers an excellent way to get the kind of feedback people need to become more fluent in good management practices.

We have deliberately used the term “fluent” rather than “competent” here. When we look at the kinds of things managers need to do, we find that most are basic communication and interpersonal skills—and that most managers are already perfectly capable of doing them. What

distinguishes good or excellent managers is the ease and frequency with which they demonstrate management practices, and their ability to adapt the practices to varied situations.

Anyone who has tried to learn a second language knows that there is a big difference between being merely competent in a language and being truly fluent in it. The same is true of the “language” of management.

## IMPLEMENTING MULTISOURCE FEEDBACK EFFECTIVELY

So, if multisource feedback is a good idea, what could we do to execute it well? Let's begin by looking at some of the common problems and what might be done to minimize or eliminate them.

### Overload

Beware feedback reports with 50 or more items.

People can change only a few things at a time. If they are confronted with too many recommendations for change, they experience overload and often nothing changes. Most feedback instruments suffer from this phenomenon; there are too many possible items for someone to deal with at once.

Overload can be managed in either of two ways: reduce the number of practices on which feedback is provided or direct people to choose no more than three to six practices to work on.

## Confounding

There's an old coaching rule that says the best feedback comes from people who see you in the game, but they should all be watching the same game.

When 360-degree feedback is provided by combining scores from peers, reports, the boss, and colleagues in other departments, the data are confounded. It's a little like asking for feedback on your ball-handling technique from people who have watched you play football, basketball, and ping pong and combining the responses into a single score. That sort of feedback won't help you much with any of the games.

Every manager plays multiple "games." The nature of a manager's interaction with reports is different from his or her interactions with departmental peers, the boss, or colleagues in other departments. For example, with direct reports, the manager is primarily in a leadership role; with the boss, the role is more like "followership"; and with departmental peers or colleagues, the role may be more like that of teammate or supplier or internal customer.

If we combine feedback for all the roles, we confound the data; if we present them all separately, we run the risk of serious overload. An alternative is to keep them separate but provide feedback from one or two sources at a time. For example, a session might provide feedback from departmental peers and reports. This makes for a manageable quantity of data and provides the opportunity for useful comparisons. Where peers and reports differ significantly, managers can ask themselves what they are doing differently with the two groups. That kind of information and analysis can be very valuable.

These two groups represent the bulk of most managers' interactions and are the sources we typically recommend for the primary or initial feedback events. We might say we're advocating 270-degree, rather than 360-degree, feedback.

## Inaccuracy

Was the rating based on observation or hearsay?

If the best feedback comes from people who "see you in the game," then they must have adequate opportunities to view your behavior in all or most aspects of the game. That is not the case for many of the people who provide feedback in the typical 360-degree, data-gathering effort. Bosses and most colleagues in other departments (and even some reports or departmental peers) see a relatively limited sample of managers' leadership behavior, so the accuracy of their judgments is suspect. One way to address this is to ask people to give their confidence in

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their rating of behavior or the extent of their opportunities to observe it.

## Difficulty of Interpretation

It isn't feedback if you can't figure out what to do about it.

Feedback is wasted unless people can see how to use it. Our experience has been that it's a rare manager who is able to go immediately and directly from looking at pages of charts and graphs to understanding their implications for changing behavior in the workplace. Even managers who are quite skilled at analyzing tables of financial data, charts and graphs of sales, or manufacturing productivity do not usually find it easy to interpret data about their own behavior or to translate the information into appropriate action.

In our practice, we have developed an approach to providing feedback that uses the support of a trained facilitator and other managers. Feedback is provided to people in small groups of four to six; typically, these are subgroups of a larger population attending a developmental session on management, leadership, or partnering. This setting allows discussion and interpretation of the feedback items and their meanings, as well as exchange of ideas about how to respond to the feedback. Usually, there is also a written tactics guide that provides suggestions for using the feedback.

## Discouraging Impact or Defensive Response

This is so bad I can't let anyone else know it.

There are several aspects of feedback that can discourage people about their ability to respond to it or cause them to become defensive. Examples include the sheer quantity of feedback items, a belief that their feedback is "worse" than that of others, the inability to take immediate action

on it, and a large gap between the feedback they receive and the feedback they expected.

The following approaches for presenting feedback encourage people to take action and thus help manage defensiveness.

- Managing the size of the effort by strongly encouraging, even insisting, that people select and focus on a relatively small number of high-priority items. We suggest two primary criteria for choosing priority items: the rating and the importance of the item to achieving managers' goals for their people and the group's results. Oftentimes, successfully changing a few high priority behaviors will also result in improvements in other related behaviors.
- Minimizing the destructive effect of comparisons with others by using self-referenced feedback. Feedback scores are presented as deviations from each individual's personal mean for all items, rather than as percentiles against a group norm. Thus, about half of the feedback items will be scored above the recipient's personal mean and half below—for everyone. This contributes substantially to reducing defensiveness and encourages openness with the data, resulting in people being much more willing to share both their feedback and their ideas for change.
- Using part of the feedback delivery session to make active plans for action on return to the workplace. Making specific plans, including time frames and people involved, can go far to encourage taking action. In addition, we encourage people to share plans in their small groups and offer encouragement and suggestions.

## Short-Lived Effect

I have forgotten about it already.

A classic problem with any change effort—from rehabilitation of juvenile offenders to corporate change programs—is the difficulty of maintaining the change over the long term. Typically, the reason for the difficulty is not the lack of value for the change nor people's initial intentions. Rather, the environment and the strength of past habits overwhelm them.

To counter this effect, we have tried to build support systems into the environment, for example:

- People can be paired as “partners” and agree to follow up with each other.
- Small support groups can be set up among peers within or across departments (the latter is an excellent way to help managers stay in touch with what's happening in other parts of the organization)

*It may well be that people who design 360-degree programs are well versed in assessment and measurement technology and woefully lacking in their understanding of feedback technology.*

- Arrangements can be made for retesting. This typically includes reconvening the group to discuss the changes they have made and the successes they have had, as well as the problems they are still struggling with. They also have an opportunity to discuss changes they have observed and make plans for maintaining positive change or tackling areas of difficulty.

## SUMMARY

There are generally two parts to 360 feedback:

1. Assessment
2. Feedback

Most commercially available 360-degree feedback programs seem to be poorly designed. They may provide reasonably accurate assessments but are woefully inadequate in their implementation and interpretation. And that is too bad. Too often one hears, “oh yes, we have a 360-degree feedback program . . . but it hasn't made much difference.” *Feedback may be the most powerful tool we have for behavior change*, but it is often perceived by recipients as more like a weapon than a tool.

Harold Stolovitch recently published a book entitled *Telling Ain't Teaching*. One might also say that “*Information Dumping Ain't Feedback*.”

The following suggestions can help individuals and organizations realize maximum benefit from feedback data.

1. Provide data in manageable chunks, either by presenting limited amounts of feedback or by directing people to select a limited set of behaviors to focus on.
2. Provide data in a group setting or, if feasible, one-on-one with a counselor to allow people to discuss

and interpret the data and exchange ideas for acting on it.

3. Provide multiple sources of knowledge—experienced facilitators, written guidelines, other managers in the organization—to help people make decisions about taking action.
4. Deliver the feedback in a way that minimizes defensiveness and maximizes openness.
5. Provide feedback from groups that have different working relationships with recipients separately.
6. Emphasize feedback from those who “see managers in the game.” Provide feedback from the boss or others separately and perhaps in a different type of setting.
7. Encourage open sharing of feedback and exchange of ideas about how to make change as individuals as well as how to influence other parts of the organization to support change.
8. Build support teams in the organization to provide ongoing support that can help maintain change.
9. Resurvey: Give people (and the organization) an opportunity to see progress as well as identify areas that still need work. 🏔️

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