

360° FEEDBACK: READY, FIRE, AIM—ISSUES WITH IMPROPER IMPLEMENTATION

George Vukotich, PhD

This article looks at 360° feedback, as well as mistakes and misuses that are often made in its implementation and use. Too often individuals look for tools to give them facts to support predetermined opinions rather than gathering facts to support individuals in their growth and development process. By identifying these issues and addressing them up front, larger issues that can negatively affect the overall culture of an organization can be avoided.

A FEW YEARS BACK, I wrote an article about how to incorporate 360° feedback into organizations (Vukotich, 2010). I wrote the article after working with dozens of organizations to help them implement their 360° feedback processes. One of the challenges I often ran into was the misperception of what 360° feedback is used for and what it can actually do. Many often saw it as a quick way to take care of individuals or to fix them. When I ran into this perspective, it was usually a sign of deeper organizational issues. I often would remind others that 360° feedback is not a quick fix or a substitute for dealing with individual personnel issues, nor is it useful for dealing with larger issues related to an organization's culture.

Although 360° feedback can be an effective tool to help individuals and organizations develop a culture of continuous improvement, it is not a substitute for building an organizational culture based on openness and trust. Implementing a 360° feedback process incorrectly can lead to individuals disengaging from interactions with coworkers and a decline in their overall work performance (Nowack, 2009), the exact opposite of what 360° feedback is intended to do. From an organizational perspective, if 360° feedback is improperly used, it creates a culture where less sharing and openness prevail for fear that what individuals say can and will be used against them.

Many issues need to be addressed in implementing and giving credibility to 360° feedback programs. Although 360° feedback can be a very effective tool, and one that I

personally believe in, it cannot be seen as a quick fix for personnel or organizational problems. I am writing this article based on misuses that I have seen and at the suggestion of a peer reviewer of one of my previous articles on the subject who was involved in a 360° feedback process that did not go as planned. This aspect of potential harm is a major consideration when considering the use of 360° feedback (Pfeffer, 2013).

HISTORY AND OVERVIEW

The idea behind 360° feedback started with the concept of assessment centers developed by the German military during World War II (Fleenor & Prince, 1997). Assessment centers were seen as a way to bring more objectivity to the assessment of individuals in their ability to perform the functions of their job. By 2002, over 90% of Fortune 500 companies were using some type of 360° performance review process (Linman, 2006). The popularity of 360° feedback grew over time as organizations found that traditional supervisor-only feedback was not as effective as feedback from a range of individuals, including upward feedback from subordinates, observations from peers, and feedback from others such as customers and business partners with whom the individual interacts (McGarvey & Smith, 1993). The idea behind 360° feedback is to gain performance insights from multiple perspectives. This includes individuals' self-evaluations, as well as those of their supervisors, peers, subordinates, and others with

whom they interact with on a regular basis. A number of categories such as communication ability, teamwork, and leadership effectiveness are common areas of measurement. Often a scale of 1 to 5, with the range of “not at all” to “always” is used. In some versions of the assessment, there is an opportunity to add comments to expand or clarify one’s ratings. Here are a couple of examples of items accompanied by a scale:

Individual is a team player:

1	2	3	4	5
not at all				always

Individual is an effective communicator:

1	2	3	4	5
not at all				always

Typically, eight to 12 individuals provide feedback that focuses on an individual. Categories of responders include the individual, supervisors, peers, subordinates, and others with whom the individual interacts such as customers and business partners. Today much of the input is done online. Once the data are gathered, generally over a 4- to 6-week period, the data are categorized and the individual is provided with the feedback. Often the way the feedback is presented plays a major role in the extent to which the receiver accepts the feedback and what the receiver does as a follow-up with the information.

BRINGING 360° FEEDBACK INTO AN ORGANIZATION

Providing feedback to individuals on their work performance in general is often difficult. The traditional employee and supervisor model has challenges based on relationships and criteria used in providing feedback related to job performance. The communications in the process are often misinterpreted. For example, today most individuals feel it is no longer acceptable to only be seen as an average performer. They are offended if they are not considered above average.

One challenge in implementing a 360° feedback process is that the very nature of work is changing. Fewer individuals work in assembly line-type environments where there are well-defined processes and the number of pieces and quality of the pieces produced can be assessed to provide clear feedback to individuals on their performance. In addition, job descriptions have become all-encompassing to the point that individuals and those

The popularity of 360° feedback grew over time as organizations found that traditional supervisor-only feedback was not as effective as feedback from a range of individuals, including upward feedback from subordinates, observations from peers, and feedback from others such as customers and business partners with whom the individual interacts.

around them begin to think that they are responsible for doing much more than is feasible. It is important to keep the criteria of assessment in mind. The problem that many organizations encounter is that they create an extensive set of competencies that are put into a job description, and they tell individuals that they will be assessed on them, but the 360° instrument that they use is not aligned to the competencies identified as required to be successful in the organization.

Identifying stakeholders is a key that is often overlooked. Yes, the individual that is the focus of the 360° feedback process is the starting point, but who else should be considered to provide relevant feedback that can be acted on? A key point is the acted-on component. As an example, too often the number scores alone are difficult to relate to and the comments that are made are in a general terms such as “Not a good leader.” Feedback like this does not provide the individual who is receiving the feedback with data or information to work with to improve.

The 360° feedback process needs to keep business goals in mind and the overall improvements that the organization is trying to make. One model proposed by Katzenback, Steffen, and Kronley (2012) suggests looking at the culture and observing the behaviors presently prevalent in an organization, as well as how people would

need to change their behavior to support the business objectives going forward. If the organization has the kind of culture desired, what kinds of new behaviors would be common? As 360° feedback is introduced into organizations under these circumstances, there should be a process that explains the goals and why it is being put into place.

SETTING THE STAGE

Too often, 360° feedback is seen as an annual check-the-box process. The problem with this approach is that behavioral issues are best addressed near the time that an incident happens and where the behaviors of individuals are observed. Waiting months in between an event and providing feedback leaves open the chance that the inappropriate behavior will happen multiple times and become part of a person's work habits well before being addressed. A second issue is that waiting long periods of time clouds memory. The specifics and details of an incident become fuzzy to all parties, and exactly what happened as well as the opportunity to correct any misperceptions has minimal impact. For coworkers that provided input, it also reinforces an image that may have been modifiable if the recipient of the feedback had immediate input about what happened and an opportunity to discuss and clear up any misunderstanding. Feedback should be ongoing (Berryman-Fink & Fink, 1996) and a natural part of the relationship between all individuals working with the given employee. The feedback that an individual receives when a process is formalized should not be a sudden surprise.

Another aspect to consider is how well the rater knows and interacts with the ratee. It is important to have some baseline of knowledge of the individual. This can be addressed by limiting those who provide input to at least 10 interactions such as project related, knowledge shared, meeting interaction, or other conversations related to work projects. Without having a base level of understanding of an individual's behaviors, it may leave assessment to the following: first impressions, most recent interactions, or other biases such as the halo or horn effect. Some raters may also set expectations based on the position that the individual has. The goal is to get ratings based on facts that are supported by observable behaviors (Jackson, 2009).

A calendaring system also helps to facilitate the 360° feedback process. If the organization attempts to do all 360° assessments of all individuals at the same time, real work can grind to a halt. Often raters are requested to be involved in the assessment of so many individuals at one time that they focus more on getting through the assessment than doing a quality job of providing input.

Scheduling assessments throughout the course of the evaluation cycle turns the task into an ongoing process that could be more easily managed.

DEVELOPMENTAL VERSUS EVALUATIVE

There are two general frameworks in which 360° feedback is conducted: (1) for developmental purposes and (2) for evaluative purposes (Hannum, 2007). There is an ongoing debate as to whether 360° feedback should be used solely for developmental purposes to help individuals improve performance or if it should be used as an evaluative tool to help address areas related to pay increases and promotions. How the tool will be used affects how individuals will respond. In fairness, those participating in the process should know up front why they are providing feedback. Credibility is lost when individuals believe they are providing input to help an individual develop and then after the fact find out that the data were actually used for evaluative purposes.

In an organization that is focused on development, a supportive learning culture includes mentors and coaches, along with the individual's direct manager, who should provide guidance on how to improve. Thus, effective organizations tend to not only have a 360° feedback process but also have coaches and mentors that work with the individuals on their development plans (Luthans & Peterson, 2003).

TRAINING

An organization focused on helping individuals develop should train its members before the 360° feedback process starts. Training should focus on how to be a rater and, for the individual being rated, on how to utilize the feedback. Both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the process need to be addressed. For example, does receiving all 5s mean good and receiving all 1s mean bad? Numbers without a clear link to what they mean will only cause confusion.

It helps to provide a context in which individuals understand how they will be rated. Before starting the process, preassessment goals should be identified and measures of progress need to be set. During postassessment, an individual's supervisor and others such as a coach should be brought together to reach agreement on the information provided in the feedback and to create a development plan for going forward.

Challenges to Address

Confidentiality is an issue that needs to be addressed. To what degree is it needed? If it is true that the more an

individual shares the more the individual can be helped, it begs the question as to whether less confidentiality is better. Or, does it bring into the open the issue that overtly pointing out an individual's weaknesses will hinder that individual's growth? Some coworkers do not want to feel responsible for career consequences that another employee is subjected to based on a rating they gave (Coates, 1998). Others argue that individuals providing feedback will be more open if they are not identified as the ones giving it (Sullivan, 2012).

From a compensation perspective, it should be made clear up front whether any type of pay raise or promotional evaluation will be based on the 360° process. When the data from 360° feedback are used as input into pay and performance appraisal, it will affect how individuals respond (Bracken, 1997). Using the data from 360° feedback as part of the appraisal process can put an organization at risk and have a negative impact on the motivation of individuals and the openness in the work environment.

Using a 360° process to fix an individual is also not an effective approach. When an individual is singled out to have a 360° done on him or her, it sets the context; the individuals being asked to participate as raters know there is some issue because this is not part of the normal

process. The underlying message being sent throughout the organization is that the purpose of 360° feedback is corrective action. From within this organization comes the stigma that if it is doing a 360° on you, there is something wrong with you and you need to be put back in line (Wimer, 2002). Table 1 looks at times when 360° feedback should not be used and gives cautions on its use.

Individuals may not have a clear direction on what to do with the feedback received. Just because individuals receive feedback does not mean they will do anything with it on their own. In some cases, individuals may not know how to improve on their own; in other cases, they may not care. Giving someone feedback without reasons for why the feedback is being provided does not accomplish much.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Culture, as defined by Deal and Kennedy (2000), is the way things get done in an organization. From an individual's perspective, there is a set of values to try to live by. It should be clear that 360° feedback is not a quick fix. It takes time to set the context so that the culture can understand what 360° feedback is and how it will be used. How an organization uses 360° feedback says a lot about

TABLE 1 THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR

360° FEEDBACK SHOULD NOT BE USED:	BE CAUTIOUS OF:
<p>As a quick substitute for performance evaluation.</p> <p>To "fix" someone.</p> <p>As an annual event. It is part of an ongoing feedback process.</p> <p>As an event without a follow-up plan of action.</p> <p>As a substitute for ongoing communication. It should be used to enhance it.</p> <p>Without having a job description with competencies to measure against.</p> <p>When individuals do not know the ratee well. This could lead to biases both positive and negative (e.g., halo effect, primacy-recency, discrimination).</p> <p>As a substitute for a supervisor taking the time to provide feedback and dialogue with the individual being rated.</p> <p>As a comparison to others approach. You do not want it to become a popularity contest.</p> <p>To judge an individual's personal values.</p> <p>By individuals that have not been trained in both how to give feedback and how to receive it. Providing a common frame of reference is key to understanding.</p>	<p>Relationships driving evaluation more than performance.</p> <p>360° being a game played to take care of certain individuals or to hurt certain individuals.</p> <p>Having a 360° process without having it linked to organization initiatives.</p> <p>Ratees trying to get a personal advantage by seeing the ratee as competition and marking them down.</p> <p>Ratees seeing this as a chance to "get even" with others.</p> <p>Use of the assessment—Evaluative or Developmental should be addressed up front.</p> <p>Making decisions based on 360° data without having a dialogue with the ratee.</p> <p>Improper comments that are used simply to insult and that the ratee cannot improve on.</p> <p>Individuals not being able to comprehend what the statements in the 360° instrument mean.</p> <p>Fairly considering data based on cultural aspects provided from individuals from different parts of the globe.</p> <p>The level of confidentiality. Will this be openly available information or kept private.</p>

How an organization uses 360° feedback says a lot about its culture.

its culture. If individuals are open to sharing information, 360° feedback can be a great way to help individuals develop. In organizations that are winner-takes-all, 360° feedback may not have the same impact because the thought of helping someone else may mean lower ratings overall to the person providing the feedback. There are also organizations that have used 360° feedback in an evaluative way such that poor ratings are viewed as a career ender.

CONCLUSION

Feedback needs to be clear and unambiguous. It should not be open to interpretation. It needs to have a standard to measure against (Jones, 1996). Competencies from an individual's job description act not only as a point of measurement but also as a standard to use in development.

Individuals should never just be given an envelope with feedback. An often incorrect term that is used is "results." Feedback should be given by a trained facilitator to set the context for the feedback. Individuals need to learn from the feedback provided and be shown how they can improve going forward. Having a plan to leverage strengths and improve on areas that are identified as needing improvement is the key to a successful individual and organizational relationship. Coaches and mentors can make a difference by being a resource for the individual.

Although 360° feedback can be an effective tool, there are many places it can go wrong. There are a number of factors to consider and areas to be cautious of. The past has shown mixed results, but the idea of getting feedback from not only your boss, but also from others who you work with makes sense from a teamwork, customer service, innovation, and development perspective. 🌟

References

- Berryman-Fink, C., & Fink, C.B. (1996). *The manager's desk reference* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: AMACOM.
- Bracken, D.W. (1997). *Should 360-degree feedback only be used for developmental purposes?* Center for Creative Leadership. Retrieved from <http://www.ccl.org/leadership/pdf/research/should360feedback.pdf>
- Coates, D.E. (1998). Don't tie 360 feedback to pay. *Training*, 38(9), 11–12.
- Deal, T.E., & Kennedy, A.S. (2000). *Corporate cultures: The rites and rituals of corporate life*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.
- Fleener, J.W., & Prince, J.M. (1997). *Using 360-degree feedback in organizations: An annotated bibliography*. Center for Creative Leadership. Retrieved from <http://www.ccl.org/leadership/pdf/research/Using360Feedback.pdf>
- Hannum, K.M. (2007). Measurement equivalence of 360° assessment data: Are different raters rating the same constructs. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 27(3), 293–301.
- Jackson, M. (2009). The halo effect in overdrive. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/natural-history-the-modern-mind/200907/the-halo-effect-in-overdrive>
- Jones, J.E., & Bearly, W.L. (1996). *360 feedback: Strategies, tactics, and techniques for developing leaders*. Amhurst, MA: HRD Press.
- Katzenbach, J.R., Steffen, I., & Kronley, C. (2012). Cultural change that sticks: Start with what's already working. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <http://hbr.org/2012/07/cultural-change-that-sticks/ar/1>
- Linman, T. (2006). *360-degree feedback: Weighing the pros and cons*. Retrieved from http://edweb.sdsu.edu/people/Arossetts/pie/Interventions/360_1.htm
- Luthans, F., & Peterson, S. (2003). 360-degree feedback with systematic coaching: Empirical analysis suggests a winning combination. *Human Resource Management*, 42(3), 243.
- McGarvey, R., & Smith, S. (1993). When workers rate the boss. *Training*, 30(3), 31–34.
- Nowack, K. (2009). Leveraging multirater feedback to facilitate successful behavioral change. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 61(4), 280–297.
- Pfeffer, J. (2013). Why 360-degree feedback doesn't work. *Talent Management*. Retrieved from http://talentmgmt.com/articles/view/why_360degree_feedback_doesnt_work/3
- Sullivan, J. (2012). *The top 40 problems with 360-degree employee feedback processes, part 2 of 2*. ERE Media. Retrieved from <http://www.ere.net/2012/03/05/the-top-40-problems-with-360-degree-employee-feedback-processes-part-2-of-2/>
- Vukotich, G. (2010). The 360 process: Planning for action. *OD Practitioner*, 42(3), 24–29.
- Wimer, S. (2002). The dark-side of 360-degree feedback. *TD*, 56(9), 37–42.

GEORGE VUKOTICH, PhD, is the dean of the College of Business at Concordia University, Chicago. In addition to his work in the field of education, he has spent over 25 years working with organizations of all sizes in areas related to change and performance improvement. He has helped design, create, and implement 360° feedback processes and associated performance measurement systems. He is a sought-after speaker and recently released his second book, *10 Steps to Successful Change Management*. He may be reached at george@georgevukotich.com