

What is 360 degree feedback?

360 degree feedback, sometimes simply called 360 feedback, is an appraisal system that gathers feedback on an individual from a number of sources who know the him / her, typically colleagues, direct reports and customers. It is usually used as a learning and development aid and its key benefit is that it gives individuals a better insight into their skills, performance, and working relationships than more traditional appraisal arrangements based on line managers' assessment alone.

The individual seeking feedback (the appraisee) typically completes a self perception questionnaire, and then asks around 6 - 10 others (the respondents) to give feedback using an identical questionnaire.

The respondents are often arranged into groups depending on the relationship they have with the appraisee; for example senior, peer, junior, client. This gives the appraisee an all round (hence 360 degree) view of his /her performance. It can work particularly well in flexible organisations where the appraisee may be part of several teams or work autonomously and the line manager may not have full visibility of the contribution he / she makes.

Background

The first documented use of 360 feedback is from the German military who began gathering feedback from multiple sources in order to evaluate officers' performance during World War II.

One of the first uses of the technique in a commercial setting occurred in the 1950s at Esso Research and Engineering Company. It was famously used by Jack Welch in the 1980s during the streamlining of General Electric.

From there, the idea of 360-degree feedback gained momentum, and by the 1990s most Human Resources and organizational development professionals understood the concept.

However, collecting and collating the feedback using paper based methods was time consuming and expensive and many practitioners steered clear of the technique. The advent of online systems, however, changed all that and 360 degree feedback became quick, cheap and effective to implement. Internet based 360 feedback solutions are now pretty much standard in commercial learning and development circles and some observers suggest that around 90% of Fortune 500 companies now routinely use it.

Structured Feedback

360 feedback works by gathering the opinions of a number of people using structured questionnaires. These comprise a combination of scored questions designed around a set of management competencies (e.g. leadership, communication, analytical skills) and open ended questions (e.g. "What does <name> do well that you would like to see them do more of?") which are intended to give people the freedom to give feedback outside the constraints of the scored questions.

The management competencies which underpin the questionnaires can either be from a general purpose set which we provide or designed around a bespoke framework to suit the customer or a specific application.

Ongoing Learning

Once the appraisee and the respondents have completed their questionnaires the results are compiled into a feedback report. The respondents' individual answers cannot be identified in the report.

The personal feedback report highlights differences between the appraisee's self perception and the feedback from others. Key areas for self-development are often highlighted. And the report becomes a critical piece of evidence to support professional development planning.

It is important that 360 degree feedback is carried out sensitively and fairly and that the individual should remain in control of the process as far as possible. There should be adequate planning beforehand and support afterwards for the participants. Those giving feedback should be encouraged to do so in an objective and positive way. The confidentiality of all participants should be respected and the feedback should be summarised and delivered to the recipient by individuals trained in feedback techniques.

Successful 360 feedback starts here...

Done well 360 degree feedback can be a major contributor to ongoing learning not only to the individual, but to the organisation as well. Online systems now make this powerful tool easily assessable at very reasonable cost both financially and in terms of people's time.

Making a success of a 360 feedback intervention, like most things, takes careful planning and implementation but the return can be many times the investment.

For more information contact us via our website at www.appraisal360.co.uk