

Understanding Rater Groups

Getting feedback from a representative cross section of people who know you is the essence of 360 degree feedback. We often get asked how to choose and group them.

Choosing respondents and rater groups

People often speak of 360 feedback as getting feedback from manager, peers, subordinates, and so on and describe that as the 360 degree circle.

In practice this grouping is an over simplification and a little thought can lead to some much better choices and classifications of respondents:

- Far more important than where a respondent sits within the hierarchy is: how well do they know you and how well do you trust them to give feedback that you can trust.
- Have you selected a range of people who see you in a variety of different situations and can therefore reflect on your whole behaviour rather than just a small section of it.
- Is yours the sort of organisation or job where formal relationships matter – or even exist – and if they do matter, which ones are likely to be important and why.

For example:

- Consider a factory with a traditional hierarchy of workers, supervisors, shift managers, department managers and so on. Here the formal relationships are likely to be quite important because the structure is well defined and people's interactions are likely to be highly dependent on their role within the organisation.
- Now consider a new style professional services business – such as a creative business or a consulting business. Here the hierarchy may be almost irrelevant, people work with whoever else happens to be on the same project, they make their own plans and may hardly ever even speak to their boss. Clearly in this case relationships and rater groups have

a completely different significance.

Sometimes differentiating between rater groupings can be vitally important. For example:

- Consider doctors working in a hospital. The opinion of their fellow doctors is likely to be significantly different to that of admin staff, nursing staff and managers. In this example it would be crucial to ensure not only that these respondent groups were all represented, but that the doctors understood the importance of taking seriously the feedback from the different groups.

Interpreting feedback

It is easy to assume that people in different rater groups will somehow each see the candidate differently, but clearly this is not necessarily so. The question to ask is “Would this categorisation make a difference and why?” If there is no clear answer then it's probably best to leave formal groupings out of the equation altogether.

When you come to interpret the feedback report you need to look carefully for clear patterns in the results.

Examine the feedback at a behaviour level, not at a competency level because the averaging process may be hiding underlying patterns.

If people in one rater group are consistently saying something different to those in another group for any given behaviour then that might be worth asking why. But the difference needs to be obvious and consistent to mean anything. If not, then it's best not to try and look for something that the evidence doesn't support.