

# Conducting a 360-degree Appraisal

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A 360-degree appraisal surveys and collects the views of all the appraised employee's colleagues, including the manager, peers, direct reports, and, on occasion, clients. Additionally, the employee will generally rate himself, so that his views of how he impacts his colleagues can be added to the mix.

There is no absolute "truth" in the reflections given in a 360-degree survey. People assess others' behaviors using their own set of values and beliefs, likes and dislikes. However, if the appraised person is perceived to be a poor change agent, he will be treated as such. To some degree, perception is reality. For this reason, 360-degree appraisals cannot be used to measure competence, just the perception of someone's competence.

## What You Need to Know

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**I am already going through a 360-degree appraisal after only three months on the job. Surely people don't know me well enough yet to comment on my performance.**

Although you have not been in your role for long, it will be interesting to find out how you are perceived and what early impact you have had on your colleagues. Research tells us that perceptions are created in seconds and, once created, are very difficult to change. So use this as an opportunity to determine your success at entering the organization and managing the perceptions of your new colleagues. Apparently, it takes between one to three years for people to *really* get to know us in our work environment.

**I run a virtual team and have been asked to collect feedback from them. They hardly ever see me. How can their feedback be accurate?**

Whether your team is virtual or not, they will nonetheless have a perception of you and an opinion to share. Managing a virtual team is really challenging but they still need to feel as if they "belong" somewhere. Use this as a means of determining how effective you are at creating a sense of team through motivating and managing them from a distance.

## **I work in a different culture from my own. Do people use the scale differently according to culture?**

Yes, there is variance between cultures. Indeed, there is bound to be a lot of “noise” in the feedback based on both cultural difference and subjectivity. This is why it is important not to treat the scale as “absolute” but to look for the patterns and trends that the data are suggesting.

## **I don't like waiting for my appraisal to get feedback. How can I make sure I know what people think of me before this event?**

You could ask for feedback from your colleagues on an ongoing basis. Let them know that you are willing to hear their perceptions throughout the year and encourage them to share their views with you. You may need to model this for them if they feel uncomfortable and explain why it is important to you, but they will soon get used to it if it is done in the right spirit.

## **What to Do**

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### **Consider What Use will be made of the 360-degree Feedback**

Before you begin to create a 360-degree feedback system, you need to be clear about your purpose in doing it. As the feedback is based on perception, it cannot be used to determine capability: someone's innate ability to perform in a particular way either in the present or future. Their perceived capability may be low (or high) as a result of many different variables. It would be unfair to prejudice (or give an advantage to) someone because of something going on in their professional environment that prevented them from delivering results, or that falsely assisted them in doing so. However, what can be determined is how competence is *perceived*, which is extremely helpful when trying to determine someone's effectiveness, planning development, or engaging in a career discussion. For this reason, 360-degree appraisals should not be used as the sole means of giving a promotion.

### **Think About the Design of the Survey Form**

Many organizations link their 360-degree surveys to their leadership or competence framework. On the basis that “what you measure is what you get,” linking the survey in this way will reinforce the desired culture, both subtly and overtly, and ensure internal consistency in respect of the metrics and the measures used. However, there may be instances when the data collected is specific to a role, activity or event. In which case, the survey form will need to reflect this explicitly. It is most important

that you only collect data that is relevant to your purpose. This means, perhaps, tailoring 360-degree feedback forms and using different ones in different circumstances.

Most 360-degree surveys contain both quantitative and qualitative feedback. The quantitative feedback usually appears as a mark on an odd scale (1–5 or 1–7), or an even scale (1–6 or 1–8). Significant in this choice is whether you force a respondent to select a point above or below the mid-point or whether you allow an “average” response which (arguably) conveys less helpful information. You will also need to decide whether you have a “don’t know” box or whether you “allow” respondents to omit questions. The quantitative feedback is helpful in highlighting patterns of behavior and identifying trends. The qualitative feedback is much more personal and variable and can contain rich information about what people could do differently to good effect. The balance between quantitative and qualitative data is generally about 10:1—40 quantitative questions to 4 qualitative questions—but this can be adjusted to suit the circumstances.

## **Consider How the Data Will Be Collected**

Less frequently now, the feedback is collected in paper form and returned to a designated person who will collect, collate, and re-present it as a report. More commonly, the feedback is collected electronically and is automatically sent to a data processing facility. Whatever your choice, the feedback collection process must be systemized and consistent. In this way, random methods of collecting feedback and/or lack of containment and confidentiality are avoided. If the data is presented in the same way each time, yearly 360-degree feedback surveys become comparable, and development success can be established.

## **Consider the Amount of Data That Will Need to be Collected**

It is sometimes felt that the more data, the better. But this is not necessarily so. If you have too few pieces of data, it is difficult to interpret the meaning behind them. If you have too many, you may find that the messages get lost. Generally speaking, between eight and fifteen respondents present a clear picture of the perceptions held in the full circle of relationships.

## **Consider How Often 360-degree Feedback Should Be Collected**

If 360-degree feedback is linked to an annual appraisal, then its regularity is set by the activity. However, if someone is a manager or member of a large team, this means that they will be spending a great deal of time filling in survey forms. To avoid “rater-fatigue,” try varying the respondents from year to year or reduce the regularity of collecting feedback in this more formal way. Try to encourage

and establish a two-way feedback exchange as a matter of course. If you can instill a culture of feedback, there will be no need to wait a full year before tackling an issue.

## **Consider Levels Of Confidentiality**

When planning a 360-degree survey, you need to think of the environment in which the feedback is collected and delivered and the level of exposure that can be tolerated within it. When sending out the survey form, you have several options in terms of establishing the respondents' identities. You can ask the respondents to include their name and relationship to the recipient on the form; to state their relationship only; or you can allow them to remain completely anonymous. Some survey forms will reveal all this information to the recipient while others will pick out and highlight the manager's feedback on the basis that a "good manager" should feel comfortable sharing his or her views openly.

## **Consider How to Share the Feedback with the Recipient**

Along with the issue of confidentiality, you need to consider how to share the data with the recipient. There will, no doubt, be a report in some form that contains both quantitative and qualitative data. Generally, in a 360-degree appraisal, the line manager sits down with his or her direct report and goes over it carefully, picking out specific points that can be expanded upon and development actions that can be pursued. In some development programs, feedback is shared in groups of non-line related people from different parts of the same organization or in open programs where participants do not know each other. Just giving a report to a recipient and leaving that person to digest it and deal with it on his or her own is not a good idea.

When you analyze the data, you will be looking for patterns and trends of perceptions which can inspire development actions. You will also be looking for what someone does well. Try to make this a positive and constructive experience. Receiving feedback can be disappointing, particularly if your own perception of how you are perceived is inaccurate. Be aware that most people take feedback as personal criticism, so be sure you provide a confidential environment where the recipient can process the feedback safely.

## **What to Avoid**

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### **You Fail to Provide the Recipient with Positive Feedback**

In most cases, people look for the negative feedback and focus on that. It seems to be a human characteristic to do so. "Tell me what I'm doing wrong!" However, there are always positive messages

so make sure these are noted. Providing positive feedback will not necessarily avoid the development issues that emerge, but will help to keep things in proportion.

## **You Use the Annual Appraisal to Say Everything That Should Have Been Said Throughout the Year**

Using 360-degree feedback at an annual appraisal provides the recipient with the opportunity to understand how he or she is perceived by colleagues. However, the relationship between the recipient and his or her line manager should include giving and receiving feedback throughout the year, so there should be no surprises on this front at the time of the appraisal.

## **You Enter the 360-degree Feedback Process Because Everyone Else Is Doing It**

Using the 360-degree appraisal because others do, and you want to employ “best practice,” is not a good enough reason to use this approach. It must be purposeful and used properly. This means making sure everyone knows why you are doing it, what you want from it, and how to conduct it. Creating a feedback culture has organization-wide implications, so you need to consider these before rushing into it.

## **You Do Not Have Proper Protocols and Processes in Place**

Sometimes managers seek verbal feedback from their direct report’s colleagues and present a summary of the colleagues’ feedback during the 360-degree appraisal. If the proper protocols are not in place, and the feedback collection process is not systematized, activities like this just serve to undermine trust and confidentiality. Feedback on hearsay is *not* good practice, so make sure it is contained and managed properly.

## **Where to Learn More**

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### **Books:**

Tornow, Walter, and Manuel London, *Maximizing the Value of 360-degree Feedback: A Process for Successful Individual and Organizational Development*. Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Peiperl, Maury A. Getting 360-Degree Feedback Right (digital download). Harvard Business Review, 2007.

Wimer, Scott, and Kenneth M. Nowack, 13 Common Mistakes Using 360-Degree Feedback (digital download). ASTD, 2002.

Hammond, Sue Annis, and Andrea B. Mayfield, The Thin Book of Naming Elephants: How to Surface Undiscussables for Greater Organizational Success. Thin Book Publishing Company, 2004.

Lipsinger, Richard, and Antoinette D. Lucia, The Art and Science of 360 Degree Feedback. Pfeiffer, 1997.

## Web Sites:

Businessballs: [www.businessballs.com/performanceappraisals.htm](http://www.businessballs.com/performanceappraisals.htm)

WorldPress: <http://wordpress.com/tag/360-degree-feedback>

360-Degree Feedback: [www.360-degreefeedback.com/faq.htm](http://www.360-degreefeedback.com/faq.htm)

reactive360: [www.reactive360.com/?referrer=googlead\\_1&gclid=CJOB49HLwYsCFQyHIAodAAAn9Ag](http://www.reactive360.com/?referrer=googlead_1&gclid=CJOB49HLwYsCFQyHIAodAAAn9Ag)