

Clear Communication Paves the Way for a Successful 360

By Jennifer Taylor, CEO and President of Assessment Plus, Inc.
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Multi-Rater Feedback, otherwise known as 360-degree feedback, continues to gain popularity as one of the most valuable tools for employee development. Several trends, such as completely customized instruments and online administration and reporting, make this process more streamlined and efficient than ever before.

The concept of the 360-degree feedback process may seem relatively simple – to give employees the opportunity to solicit input from those with whom they most closely work. Receiving feedback from not only the direct manager, but also direct reports, peers, customers and other colleagues, enables individuals to gain more insight into how their behavior impacts others, and understand how others perceive their strengths and developmental areas. Because each rater offers a unique view, it produces a much more complete picture of an employee's performance.

Although a simple idea, the process, administration and data collection can be relatively complex. One of the factors that significantly contribute to a successful assessment program is a solid communication plan.

As with any assessment program, following a clear communication plan will result in greater value and a more meaningful 360-degree feedback process. Here are some specific guidelines for ensuring that the most important information is conveyed to those participating in this worthwhile process, thus ensuring a more successful program.

Who is sponsoring this program? It is recommended that an internal champion of the assessment process, typically the CEO, convey the message about the importance of this initiative. It is essential that top management buy in to and clearly communicate the goals of the 360-degree assessment process and how it relates to the company's business strategy. This consistent message must be shared from the beginning.

Why is this assessment program being implemented within the organization? Is this part of a larger leadership development initiative? Will the feedback collected be used for development only or as part of the performance appraisal process? It is critical that those who are participating in this process as feedback recipients, and as raters, have a clear understanding of why it's being implemented and how the results will be used. It is not sufficient to merely inform raters that they must complete assessments for their boss by a designated date, there also needs to be a clear understanding of the value to be gained. Too often, I hear people say, "I had no idea why I was going through this process....I was just told that it was something I had to do."

Are the results from this assessment program confidential? This process can be considered invasive by some and may result in fear, vulnerability and a level of discomfort. It is strongly recommended that the information gained from this type of assessment process be kept strictly confidential and that all ratings provided (other than the ratings given by the direct

manager) be completely anonymous. From the beginning, it is imperative that the participants and raters receive accurate information about how the data will be used, as well as who has access to the results. This will enhance the overall comfort level and minimize inaccurate assumptions and, perhaps, the sting of constructive criticism.

Provide Participant and Rater Training. Prior to launching this type of assessment process, educating those raters and ratees who will be participating can dramatically enhance success. Providing helpful information about how to select raters, how to interpret the rating scale, the importance of providing written comments, and how to give constructive feedback in a productive, non-critical manner, are all topics that should be covered. Learning to receive feedback is just as important as giving feedback. In addition to providing information about how to provide feedback, it is essential to offer guidelines and techniques in how to deal with the feedback received.

Who should be contacted regarding questions about the process? Provide the program. Many organizations utilize an external company to manage the feedback process, while also dedicating some of their own internal resources. Clearly define who will be responsible for the various phases of the assessment project. Many questions arise during this type of process, and it is important that those participating know where to go for questions and have confidence that their issues will be addressed and their questions accurately answered in a timely manner.

What is the timeline? Ensure that a realistic timeline is established at the inception of the assessment process and communicate the timeline to all involved.

There are several critical dates and deadlines throughout an assessment process. If the feedback recipients and/or the raters are not made aware of these deadlines, the quality and quantity of the feedback may suffer. Providing the critical dates and milestones of the process will help keep everyone on track.

What are the expectations, and how will employees be held accountable? Build in accountability to ensure that the information gathered from this assessment process is actually being used. By incorporating what the individuals have learned, they can develop meaningful action plans that will help keep them on track. By clearly defining the behavior they wish to change, or how they plan to leverage one of their strengths, they will have taken the first step in action planning. The most effective action plan is specific, practical and simple. It is recommended that the resulting action plan be shared with the person's direct manager, as well as any other co-workers who can serve as support.

Once the individuals go through the 360-degree feedback process, receive their results and implement an action plan, they have just begun. Consistently following up with their co-workers and actively soliciting input informally is critical to determining whether or not their action plans are working. Once individuals have had ample time to implement their action plan, they can measure their level of improvement on the specific areas they targeted in their plan.

A well designed assessment program that is carefully implemented can significantly enhance employees' effectiveness. Development is not a one-time occurrence- it is about continuously striving to improve as an employee, a leader and a person.