Vangent White Paper

The 360° Process: Planning for Implementation

To maintain a competitive advantage in today's business world, it is important for employers to give their employees the opportunity to understand how they are viewed by others they interact with in the workplace. Three hundred sixty degree programs explore these views to help identify developmental needs and provide a tool to help individuals, teams and organizations be more successful. This evaluation process has been around for over a quarter century, but its utility and application are still a matter of debate.[1] Although the discussions below are unlikely to resolve all these issues, there are a number of points that should be taken into account when considering implementation of a 360° program.

TheThe 360º process was originally designed to provide a standardized, structured process in which an individual receives feedback from co-workers. This feedback generally comes from supervisors, peers, subordinates and/or others with whom the individual interacts with on a regular basis. Beyond functional business relationships, some organizations solicit external feedback by asking customers, suppliers and business partners for input. In some cases, the "whole person" concept has been considered, which includes input from family, friends and external organizations with which the individual interacts. Note that it is important to consider confidentiality issues when including this input. Whether all potential sources are applicable is a function of the purpose of the 360º process.[2]
Knowing the answers to the following questions can help the organization and individuals determine the type and number of raters from which to seek feedback:

– What are the goals of the process?
– What other organizational initiatives link to it?
– How will development impact the organization and others involved?

The answers to these questions are important in understanding goals and objectives, and hence to build an effective implementation plan. Answering why the 360º process is being implemented provides a foundation to build upon and sets expectations for outcomes. Knowing the goals also provides direction for growth. Defined areas of focus increase the chance for improvement. Additionally, linking personal development to the development of others in the organization provides a commonality to facilitate the mutual improvement of all.

Purpose for the Process

Three hundred sixty degree evaluations are designed to provide a source of measurement to help gauge and determine individual and/or organizational progression at a point in time. If used properly, 360º programs can be beneficial for individuals and organizations. Such programs can be useful for benchmarking, identifying development opportunities and tracking personal growth and development. Current research, such as the study behind the book Good to Great[3], looks at successful organizations as models and refers to, "having the right people on the bus and getting the wrong people off", illustrating that 360º programs can help identify valuable individuals.

An organization's culture, level of trust among individuals and the respect for one another also play a significant role. If cohesiveness, trust and respect are high, individuals can share freely and honestly. The process of giving and receiving feedback and drawing attention to specific incidents at or near the time and place they happen, increases the odds for improvement. Development is greatest when feedback is immediate, rather than provided at set times or in conjunction with an annual performance appraisal.

Proper Use Yields Results

Three hundred sixty degree tools are only as good as the information that feeds them. If participants enter this process with anything less than an honest approach, little will be gained from the exercise.

Three hundred sixty degree programs can provide detrimental results if used or implemented improperly. One topic of concern involves the appropriateness of using 360º programs as an evaluative tool. Although a majority of organizations believe 360º programs should be used for developmental purposes only, there are some that use the results to help determine performance ratings, which may have a direct impact on pay and promotions. If this is the case, several issues need to be considered. Incentive-based uses, such as raises and promotions, may undermine the spirit of the 360º process away from a discovery and developmental tool. There are also many pragmatic and legal considerations when using the 360º process as an evaluative tool. For instance, employee focus may diminish from getting the job done well to that of trying only to please others. The result may present a form of collusion amongst employees (e.g., "Rate me well and I'll rate you well") or may produce retaliatory behavior toward other work and non-work incidents. The bottom line is that productivity can suffer as a result.[4]

When used incorrectly, the process may also produce inefficient and costly results for both the individual and the organization.[5] Improper use can cause permanent damage to the personal and professional relationships individuals need in order to be successful. Additionally, poorly implemented programs can cause rifts in functional and reporting relationships, resulting in low morale and lack of cooperation among work groups.

Three hundred sixty degree programs are simply the beginning of the development process, not the end point. All too often 360º programs are approached as a check list. Organizations often do not have the staff, knowledge or skills to follow through on the developmental components that link back to the overall organizational strategies and individual career development. These components are the key to its success and if excluded or done incorrectly, the process may prove a waste of time and resources.

When evaluating prepackaged 360º programs, note whether they offer a development guide or post-results process in conjunction with the program. One such offering is provided with the Campbell™ Leadership Index, created by Dr. David Campbell, from the Center for Creative Leadership. The Development Planning Guide[6] included with this offering helps facilitate the development and improvement process.

When evaluating whether or not to implement a 360º program, it is important to identify a starting point. Once this is identified, a plan of action can be designated to focus on multiple areas including upward mobility, personal development and/or organizational strategy. Once it has been determined that a 360º program should be implemented, multiple factors need to be addressed. From a sequential process the stages for these factors are: Preparation, Introduction, Administration, Analysis, Feedback and Follow-up. **These stages and considerations include those listed in the following outline:**

360° Program Factors

Preparation Stage

- Determine how the 360º program links to the overall goals and organizational strategy.
- Determine how the 360º program links to the overall performance management, succession planning and the career development process.
- Address whether the program will be used for evaluative purposes, as well as developmental purposes.
- Determine what the evaluation will address and if this links to the organization's values and competencies, to general characteristics related to personality and/or to some combination of the two.
- Determine if the process requires a prepackaged product or a customized evaluation; keep in mind time, cost, validation, norming and comparison components.
- Determine if the evaluation will include narrative questions or just focus on a quantitative assessment. (e.g., 1-5 Likert scale?).

  Note: *Quantitative is quicker and easier, but qualitative can provide more robust and detailed feedback. Using specific examples makes a development plan more actionable.*
- Determine who in the organization will be part of the process. If the process is simultaneous, make sure you keep resources, organizational change and work schedules in mind.
- Determine how the raters will be selected:[7] by the individual, by the supervisor or by some combination.

  Note: *The ratee's impression of rater credibility should be considered.*
- Determine who will see the data and communicate with individuals involved in the process to identify what information will be provided.
- Build a clearly laid out project plan, communicate it and investigate potential deviations from it.

Introduction Stage

– Determine in what context the 360º program should be introduced (e.g., executive introduction?).

– Conduct training for raters providing context and examples, especially in cross-functional or cross-cultural scenarios. There are significant differences in dealing with different functions and cultures.

– Remind raters to focus on the areas of measure and to put aside biases and personal impressions.

– Remind ratees that responses should be based on present conditions rather than ideal situations. The point is to use the 360º program as a tool for improvement; identify a starting point.

– Introduce timelines along with resource requirements to help gain commitment from the participants and department heads.

– Identify resources who can help coach a ratee through the development process with information and ideas related to specific issues.

  Note: 360º administrators and human resource professionals may not be an appropriate choice for this process.

– Managers should be included as they are responsible for the development of their employees.

– Check for understanding and to ensure everyone has the same frame of reference.

– Make a list of raters and ratees that includes contact information. This is important for managing the process and to see how often raters are asked to participate, as well as to track completion rates and manage project timelines.

– Be sensitive to the confidentiality of raters.

Administration Stage

– Determine if the proximity of the individuals will present difficulties.

– Timing: The closer the administration of the evaluation to the time of feedback the more direct the impact (target 4 weeks or less).

– Determine the role of technology (e.g., does everyone have access?).

– Plan, rollout and provide appropriate access to evaluations and resources.

– Monitor progress and remind participants of upcoming deadlines.

– Check to see if individuals need help.

– Collect and consolidate input.

Analysis Stage

– Determine how the data will be analyzed and for what specific purposes.

– Ensure the analysis corresponds with the purposes and objectives initially identified (norms, etc.).

– Determine whether or not the analysis will compare individuals to predefined standards.

– Determine if individuals will be compared to others or around their own set of expectations.

– Determine if considerations should be given for "where they are" vs. "where they want to develop to" and with input from others.

– Determine if there will be comparisons to competencies, historical data and/or previous 360º data for individuals or to data from others.

– Determine if the analysis will be shared with individuals' supervisors, peers, etc., and what the implications might be, given the data and output.

– Consider whether individuals from different cultures will be participating in the 360º process.

Note: *Keep in mind cultural differences could have an impact and check for consistencies in scoring. Are the differences due to how individuals are seen by others or because of differences in the cultural norms of raters?*

Feedback Stage

– Take precautions to ensure that results are provided to individuals in the appropriate context and with an explanation of what the data implies.

– Include the necessary "Level Setting" component to prepare individuals to receive the feedback.

Note: *It is important to put the data in context of the overall strategy and what it means to individuals while keeping the culture of the organization in mind.*

– Instruct individuals to view the feedback from an overall improvement perspective.

– Tie the feedback to correlations with the in-dividuals' positions, successes and/or failures.

– Walk through the feedback with individuals to look for points of agreement and disagreement. To put the plan into action, there needs to be agreement with the data and a discussion around the differences in scores to explore any misperceptions or misunderstandings.

Follow-up Stage

– Work with individuals to develop action plans and determine what they want to improve upon, based on the feedback received.

– Approach and address three to five items during a six-month period to allow for a focus that includes metrics.

– Make and choose goals that are both measurable and attainable, as with any performance plan. Remember the SMART model: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely.

– Determine what the measures of improvement will be and set checkpoints over time to measure progress.
– Check back regularly (at least monthly) to monitor progress and determine if help is needed to address additional issues.

These stages are not meant to be prescriptive, but to provide insight for issues to be considered. Other considerations to keep in mind that may have significant impact on the overall return on investment from a 360º initiative include:

– Familiarity with Ratees
– Raters
– Organizational Culture

Familiarity with Ratees

With continuous organizational change sometimes it is difficult to find 8-10 individuals who know one individual well enough to provide insightful feedback. If this is the case, what often happens reflects a "first impressions" approach. Here only surface level traits are measured and no substantial degree of insight, other than in a few general areas, is provided. Individuals new to an organization are often reluctant to say they are not known well enough and administrators often may not check. Individuals selected to rate another individual (raters) should generally have at least six months of regular interactions with the ratee.

An alternative to help overcome this issue is to ask individuals to build a list of items based on those involved with the 360º evaluation and compare them with overall mean ratings from others in their functional area. Individuals should determine which areas have the largest gaps. Based on this, without direct feedback from others, individuals should focus on the three to five areas with the largest, most significant gaps to help build a development plan. The selected areas should be linked to the level of importance in the organization and how other successful individuals have developed. The development work is based on a self-appraisal that is compared to an overall group mean. Sharing the developmental areas with others provides a method for ongoing feedback. With this approach individuals can participate in the development process and not feel isolated. It also gives individuals an opportunity to develop and feel closer to the organization and their colleagues, which is crucial early on when the turnover rates for new employees are highest.

Raters

There are a few considerations when working with the raters as well. Burnout is one. After a rater has provided input on 10-20 evaluations, the attitude often turns into "just getting it done" rather than of providing valuable feedback. Keep track of the number of times a rater is asked to complete a 360º evaluation for someone else.

An organization may even set a one or two month time period during which individuals are asked to complete all evaluations and a rater may be responsible for providing input for 30-40 individuals. After a certain point, raters can experience fatigue, distorting their view. Careful planning is important to avoid such situations. It may be useful to give raters some planning milestones for completing the ratings (e.g., four per week) and send out friendly reminders regularly over the course of the program.

Organizational Culture

If there is a strong team dynamic and collaborative environment, sharing results with team members allows for a positive environment where others are willing to help and can also develop themselves as they give help. In competitive cultures, showing vulnerability can cause individuals to be perceived as weak. In cases such as this, sensitive information should be shared with discretion and limited to a select group of individuals. Additionally, competitive cultures often have "winner take all" mentalities. Where this is the case, focus should be on addressing the culture of the organization itself, rather than whether a 360º program should even be implemented.

Follow-up Strategy

A component that is often overlooked is that of the development strategy after the feedback is given. There are a few approaches that can help focus on the "what" and "how". One approach is to focus on the areas an individual has decided to improve upon to make prioritization easier in terms of Ease of Improvement vs. Importance of Improvement. Selecting items that are both easy and important allows for a quick success and can motivate action to tackle other more challenging developmental items. Working on a combination of short and long-term developmental areas makes the process more efficient and learning more effective. Mapping the areas on a matrix, such as that shown in Table 1, aids in clarification.

Improvement items that are high in importance should be examined and strategies put in place to accomplish the desired changes. Getting agreement for the plan of action and measures of change with an individual's supervisor or coach should take place up front if either is involved in the process. Table 2 provides a sample format that can facilitate the approach and measurement of pro-gress. The example, uses "Verbal Communication Ability" to enhance effective communication.

Table 1. Individual Improvement: Ease vs. Importance

Importance of Improvement		Ease of Improvement: Difficult	Ease of Improvement: Easy
	High	Strategic Long-Term Development	Quick Win
	Low	Low Priority	As Time Allows

Table 2. Area of Focus: Verbal Communication Ability

Current Feedback	Desired Feedback	Plan of Action	Barometer of Change
		1. Take an executive level communication class & com-plete by end of next month.	1. Successful completion of class by end of next month.
		2. Find individuals that rated high in this area. Determine what factors differentiate them.	2. Determine how you compare with identified role models and recognize growth opportunities.
		3. Share your objective with others you trust.	3. Identify feedback, what is working and what needs further change.
		4. Take a lead role in presenting and facilitating team meetings.	4. Track meeting input and the communication process. Reflect on communications. Recognize successes and opportunities for improvement.
		5. Ask for feedback from team members on communication style changes.	5. Evaluate feedback from team members Adjust accordingly and regularly.
		6. If supervisors are involved, meet periodically and share your progress.	6. Check for agreement and continue to develop.

Conclusion

While the debate over the correct use of 360º evaluations may continue for years to come, this article has identified some considerations to provide a perspective for implementing an effective process. If a 360º process is already in place, some points to consider have been illustrated to enhance the overall usefulness of these programs for your organization. Keep in mind the necessity to clearly identify the purpose and goals of 360º programs. Communicating expectations throughout the organization helps individuals focus on their roles and related responsibilities that will make the overall effort a success. Linking the 360º program to the larger organizational strategies, such as succession planning and career development, ensures that the monies spent demonstrate a positive return on investment. Most important, the assessment process is just the starting point in a development process to help ensure the right people with the right skills are ready when needed.

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