

Tip #10

USING YOUR 360° TO CREATE SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

What if there were a “magic bullet” for improving performance in the workplace?

We all know that workplace performance can be compromised by a lot of managerial behaviors. You know... Susan tends to micro-manage and drives her direct reports crazy. Paul talks but rarely listens and so misses out on critical information that affects his bottom line. Millie doesn't plan well so her staff is always over-stressed. John doesn't know how to handle the conflict within his group so he ignores it. Jim is so difficult to be around that even his boss limits contact with him.

That's where the magic bullet comes in. It identifies problem behaviors, people change them, and problems disappear! Unfortunately, that bullet does not exist – although many companies think it does. They call it 360° feedback (or upward feedback or multi-rater feedback – take your pick).

Don't get us wrong – 360° feedback programs can be **very** valuable. But they have to be done right. And doing it right takes a lot of work, though the payoff can be worth it.

Set Clear Expectations

It is important to communicate from the very beginning why the organization is doing a 360°. Participants and raters alike should know the purpose of the program and what,

if any, decisions will be made as a result of the data.

Most research has shown that the best use of 360° data is for personal development. Knowing this can make participants feel less threatened and thus more willing to embrace the process. And when raters know the purpose of the 360° is for development, they tend to be more honest, take more time, and provide better feedback.

Results can also be used as input into performance appraisals, but those who choose to go that route should do so with some caveats:

- » Remember that 360° results are based on perceptions, not stable personality or behavioral traits.
- » Raters who know that someone's job depends upon their 360° results may actively try to sabotage an unpopular manager and get them removed.
- » Situational and interpersonal constraints will affect ratings, e.g., direct reports may have less insight into strategic decision-making because they have less opportunity to view the process. And if they like someone, raters tend to give that person high marks in everything, even things they may have little direct knowledge of.

Have realistic expectations for your program. And whatever your decision, make sure you communicate it clearly so everyone involved understands the potential outcome.

Some companies, often with the best of intentions, inadvertently sabotage their 360° programs by insisting that every manager participate in a 360° every year.

Think About the Raters

Many organizations spend a lot of time concentrating on those who are *receiving* feedback (i.e., participants) and neglect those who will be *providing* the feedback. But this group is important and should not be taken for granted.

Communication to raters is important. They need to know the goals of the program as well as the process itself, e.g., how much time do they have to complete the surveys? Is there a maximum number they will be asked to complete? What do they do if they feel they don't know the participant well enough to rate them? Rater training can also be very useful in helping them understand *how* to rate behaviors. And raters often need to be reassured about anonymity because many will not be honest – especially in written comments – if they believe they can be identified.

One common problem with 360°s is having too few raters. We encourage clients to remember that not everyone who is invited to rate someone will do so; individuals may have been asked to rate several different people and feel they cannot spare the time, or may be on vacation, or feel they don't know someone well enough to provide feedback. It is very disheartening for someone to receive a feedback report with several “blank” lines because of an insufficient response. Participants should invite anyone whom they believe can provide *meaningful* feedback to rate them. The goal is to have enough input from a variety of perspectives so that the feedback is representative and generalizable.

We also encourage organizations to allow participants to have input into the selection of raters. This can be very important to building buy-in to results. When raters are

selected by someone else, participants are more likely to discredit the results – especially if they're bad. Allowing participants some say in who rates them helps ensure acceptance of the findings.

Think About Timing

Some companies, often with the best of intentions, inadvertently sabotage their 360° programs by insisting that every manager participate in a 360° every year. For most companies, this is simply not sustainable. The most expensive part of implementing a 360° program is not what you pay the vendor, but the costs from a time standpoint. If every manager must complete a self-assessment plus 360°s for his boss, his direct reports, and his peers every year, the program will eventually collapse under its own weight.

While conducting a full 360° program every year may be too much, it's important not to leave participants with no way to gauge their progress. That's why implementation of a tracking survey – a short “update” survey that measures progress – can be the best solution for most organizations. We'll talk more about this later.

Enlist Manager Support

Behavioral change rarely happens in a vacuum. Research shows that employees are more likely to change if their manager supports the process. However, there are many levels of managerial support.

In terms of process, managers should be involved in the selection of raters (perhaps through an approval process). Access to results differs by organization. We have worked with companies where only the participant sees his/her report; in others,

Managers should be actively involved in the development plans of their direct reports.

managers see a summary of key strengths and opportunities but no data; and in still others, managers receive a copy of the reports for all those who report to them. Much depends upon the level of trust in the organization as well as its experience with 360°.

In all cases, however, managers should be actively involved in the development plans of their direct reports. This includes being able to approve them and offer suggestions. Managers must also be prepared to support participants' plans with resources if needed; to steer them toward projects that will help them build the desired skills and/or knowledge; and to provide "stretch" assignments to help them grow. In short, managers must be partners in their employees' development.

That is why training can be very important for managers, too. Effective training can help them know and understand their role in the process, and ensure they don't use the 360° for the wrong reasons or as a proxy for doing their job as a manager (in writing the person's appraisal, for example). Training can also provide managers with tools and techniques to support a participant's development.

Move the Needle

Of course, the most important part of any 360° program is the achievement of behavioral change – that is, sustained behavioral change. We all know it's easy for someone to alter a behavior for a week or two (ask any parent in the weeks before the holidays!). It is much harder to make the change permanent. So what's the best way to proceed?

1. The first order of business is to ensure that participants have the knowledge and

skills to **accurately interpret** their data reports. It is very common for participants to misinterpret what the report is telling them, e.g., to focus in on a single negative rater or fail to see patterns. Participant training or coaching can be very useful in helping participants identify their areas of strength and opportunities for improvement.

2. The next step is to prepare some sort of **personal development plan**. The plan typically involves specific goals and the actions participants plan to take to achieve those goals. It is very important that development goals are clearly tied to individual performance goals in current and future job(s). This not only increases motivation toward change, it focuses efforts on those things that are most important to performance and company success. Again, training or coaching can play a valuable role in helping individuals develop feasible plans.
3. To help in the development and implementation of plans, have a **formal process** in place to document actions, times, resources, and progress. Provide some initial developmental suggestions to stimulate thinking and give participants a place to start. Keeping in mind that most development happens on the job, make sure these development recommendations include behaviors that an individual can implement on an everyday basis.
4. Research shows that those who **share results with raters** are more likely to see improvements. However, this "sharing" should be done judiciously. Most companies recommend that participants thank their raters. Some companies also

Participants should be encouraged to pull in others – their manager, peers, mentors, trusted direct reports, even family members and friends – and ask for feedback and help in their change efforts.

require that participants hold a meeting with their direct reports to share their 360° results. But this strategy often backfires. One group told us their manager shares detailed information, including scores, every year after the process ends, and then doesn't do anything about it, simply fueling their frustration. Another told us her manager said he viewed his results as a reflection of his personality and therefore his people should not expect any change. One man said the feedback meetings were so painful that he now just gives high scores to everyone to avoid the unpleasantness that follows lower scores. If you plan to require meetings with direct reports, be sure to set down some guidelines and train your managers on how to hold effective feedback meetings.

5. Finally, participants should **develop a support system** within and even outside of the organization. Many people who are trying to change a specific behavior (e.g., losing weight or stopping smoking) find that having a support group or "buddy" to cheer them on can be very helpful. Participants should be encouraged to pull in others – their manager, peers, mentors, trusted direct reports, even family members and friends – and ask for feedback and help in their change efforts. Participants can also show mutual support for each others' efforts.

Track Progress

Behavioral change takes time. It is important for the organization to recognize this and

allow participants that time. However, organizations should also build in periodic checks of progress to support sustained effort toward change. An obvious place to start is in the development plan itself. Encourage participants to build in interim deadlines and periodic progress checks, or to schedule status updates with their managers.

It can also be helpful to incorporate a formal progress check into the process. According to research, change is more likely to occur when progress is measured. For example, people in weight-loss programs who weigh themselves every day are less likely to gain back the weight. Employee development is no different. And in business, as we know, "what gets measured gets done."

Some organizations make use of a "pulse" or tracking survey after six months or a year. This very short survey asks a few follow-up questions related specifically to areas participants have been working to strengthen since receiving their 360° feedback. This helps the organization determine whether people and plans are on track, and allows individuals to make any necessary "mid-course corrections" if they don't see the progress they had hoped for. The "mini-survey" format provides necessary information and doesn't tax the resources of the organization.

No, there is no "magic bullet." But there are ways to help ensure that behavioral change does happen. Set the right expectations, initiate appropriate communication, training, and support, and build accountability into the process. All of this helps ensure follow-through – and that is the best source of sustainable change.