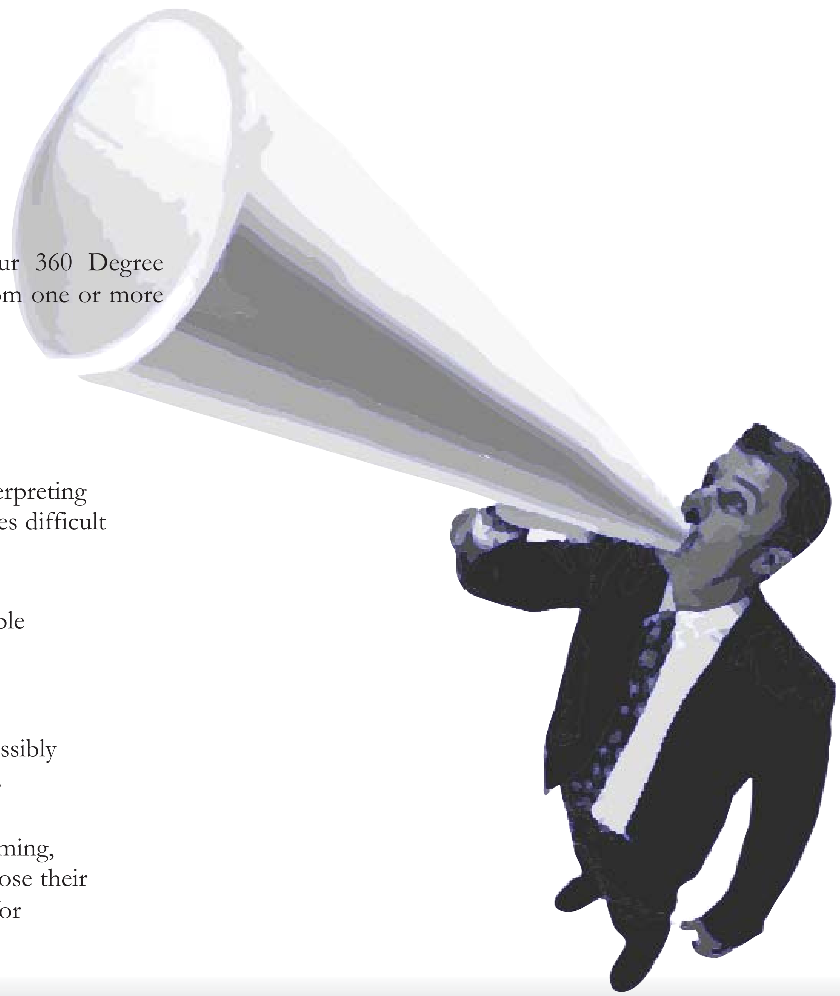
: the LAST word :

by Clinton Wingrove

Let Me Give You Some Feedback

360 degree feedback has been accused of being less than effective in a number of industry surveys and reports. With the lack of 'cause and effect' and survey data validity, even the surveys themselves are questionable.



Let me give you some feedback on your 360 Degree Feedback process. It probably suffers from one or more of the following:

- artificially high ratings, making senior management question its robustness
- relatively low differentiation, making interpreting the feedback and clearly identifying priorities difficult for the recipients
- there is more "interest" than demonstrable sustained development activity
- repeat usage producing feedback that is extremely similar to the initial feedback, possibly worse, and so the engagement level crashes
- continued debates about the scale, the timing, whether or not the participants should choose their own providers, whether it should be used for assessment or only for development …
and you are getting tired of it.

Well, it may not be that bad; but you can probably identify with some of these issues. So, here are 10 practical ideas for you.

1. Make the wording of your questions/statements in 'everyday language'

I prefer to use the term 'washroom-speak'. Too many questionnaires are couched in academic terms and developed for use in calibrated assessment processes implemented by trained professionals. 360 degree feedback meets neither of those criteria.

360 questionnaires are used by anyone. He or she reads them quickly and, if the essence of the question does not hit them right between the eyes, they will give bland ratings. For the questionnaire to be most effective, the language must be similar to the language used by two colleagues chatting privately about someone, e.g., "cuts to the chase", "gets things done", "does not 'pass the buck'", "quickly makes sense of data", and "walks the walk and talks the talk". These short pithy statements under clear Competency Headings elicit far better data than long flowery statements.

2. Help users to understand what a low rating really looks like

Two decades of being bombarded by Competency models, all couched in terms of the ideal behavior, has generated an illness - 'positive blindness'. Many have lost their sensitivity to what 'unacceptable behavior' looks like. They are no longer able to calibrate the lower part of the rating scale; so, they don't use it!

The often-attempted solution has been to develop anchored scales, where every value is defined. This a) is expensive, b) is exceedingly difficult to do well, and c) demands maintenance. Based on extensive anecdotal evidence, many feedback providers simply don't read these scales after the first few statements , resorting to treating the scale as a simple Likert-style scale anyway.

One option that appears to work is to continue with common Likert-style scales and for each question, provide a 'pop-up' or other tool to enable people to see examples of behavior that would justify only the lowest rating. If you do it well, they will almost certainly be surprised to realize how common those behaviors are and will read what is now a lot less text than with fully anchored scales. Some examples have seen average ratings on a 6 point Likert-style scale reduce by as much as 0.7 as a direct result.

3. Keep the questionnaire short

Study your data. Look at the average variance in the ratings of the first 10 questions and the last 10 questions in each submitted questionnaire. If these are significantly different, it might be that the items simply generate different rating patterns but, if the latter is lower than the former, you may well have a questionnaire that is too long, i.e., people get tired or bored by the end. Any questionnaire over 40 questions is very prone to this.

4. Define the scale, not merely describe it

Most 360 degree feedback tools use scales that include, 'Agreement' or 'Frequency', and will have a simple description, e.g., "Rate each statement based on the extent to which you agree it describes the subject."

Ratings will improve if you sharpen this statement,
e.g., "Rate each statement based on the extent to which you agree it describes the subject's characteristic behavior when fulfilling her/his role in the organization." or "Rate each statement based on the frequency with which you observe the subject displaying the behavior to the standard described when given the opportunity to do so."

5. Explain to feedback PROVIDERS the expectations of them!!!

Brief participants (the intended recipients) in any 360 degree feedback process; that is essential. However, do not forget the providers of the feedback; they are the ones who will produce the data thus control its quality. If they do not understand their role and the critical nature of it, the quality of the data will suffer.

For the sake of the participants, the providers need to understand that it is their duty (especially if they are also employees) to provide rich quality data as objective as possible - no guessing (no rating is better than an invalid rating), and as differentiating between relative strengths and relative limitations as possible. They need to be given permission, if not instruction, to view this as a critical process in enhancing their organization's performance.

6. Ensure that the process itself does not adversely affect the ratings

The debate about whether 360 Degree Feedback should be used for assessment or development continues to rage. The reality is that this depends on the organization, other processes, what they are trying to achieve, etc. It is also a fact that how the data is used and the extent to which this is fully understood by those providing the feedback affects the validity, reliability and usefulness of the data.

A hybrid process that seems to work well is to a) use 360 Degree Feedback mid-assessment cycle, b) treat the detailed feedback

Continued on page 24

 Continued from page 19

data/report as confidential to the recipient, but demand that the recipient produce a detailed development plan that he/she can defend to his/her manager, and c) equip those managers the probing skills with which to test the robustness of the plan without having to specifically demand, "So, what were your 360 Degree Feedback scores."

7. Remove norms

Everyone wants to know how they compared to everyone else, yet in most cases, the information is impossible to understand and creates more of a diversion than a lever for positive change. Most individuals struggle to understand their own feedback and, for example, what a 3.6 means. So, how are they going to understand what it means to have scored 3.6 against a norm of 3.7 for a total group, the composition of which is not known (rhetorical). Theoretically useful though norms may be, they are useless, distracting and potentially dangerous! The only thing that any one feedback recipient can do is to identify his/her relative strengths and limitations in the context of the upcoming challenges that he/she faces and then decide what to do about those. *That* is what we should have them focus on.

8. Real-time rater feedback

Performance appraisals often suffer from similar inflated ratings; conventional wisdom tells us this. So, we either use forced rankings (which means that we are now making no attempt at absolute assessment - it is all about relativities) or we manipulate the data after it has been presented and discussed - e.g., to compute merit award bands, i.e., "We close the stable door after the horse has bolted." Why? Because that was all you could do when you were using paper-based processes; you did not have or know about the problem until all the data was accumulated. However, with web-based processes that is no longer the case.

Web-based 360 Degree Feedback tools can monitor the quality of data at entry, compare submitted scores to models etc, and present back to the provider comments and suggestions on how their submission might be improved. This real-time response can enable the provider to re-think their submission and enhance its quality. This can achieve reductions in overall averages as well as increases in differentiation i.e., more useful data! It can also be a lever in helping all feedback providers to improve their skills at observing and assessing the behaviors of others in a more general context.

9. Use drill down questionnaires

The vast majority of 360 Degree Feedback instruments cover a spectrum of competencies, i.e., they are analogous to a full health check that we might have every few years. The assumption is that we could be more or less 'healthy' in any one or more of the areas, so we explore all of them.

So, why then, having received this feedback, gone through a facilitated process to identify the key development needs, invested in planning appropriate action, taken it, and then a few months or a year later, decided to redo the feedback to see if that targeted activity worked, do we retake the entire process?! That would be like learning from a health check that the only thing to address was cholesterol levels, spending 3 months working on them and then taking the entire medical again.

If we invest in a targeted development activity(s) following a 360 Degree Feedback, we should use targeted, drill-down' 360's to explore the impact. These can be shorter and they can also probe the specific behavioral area more deeply. In this way, the feedback will again be fresh and useful. People simply can't change large numbers of behaviors over short time periods, so focus on the ones they try to change.

10. Facilitate and Follow-up

Lastly, expose fewer people to the process and invest more heavily in it. If you are not prepared to provide one-to-one skilled facilitation and proactive follow-up for each participant, don't waste your money. I have a very tasteless expression that reminds me of the importance of facilitation and follow-through, "You don't make ugly people pretty just by giving them mirrors; at best, you merely risk reminding them aware of their problem." **END**

Clinton Wingrove is a Senior Vice President and Principal Consultant of Pilat HR Solutions. He has been designing, implementing, and coaching multi-rater feedback internationally at executive and senior manager level since the mid-80's. Mr. Wingrove was one of the lead technical consultants appointed by the UK government to develop the UK's professional standards for Human Resources vocational qualifications. He also led the process design and computerization for 3M UK's major distribution center. Mr. Wingrove's experience which included his early careers in work study, operational research, and computer systems design has stayed with him and now forms a solid reference point when designing HR processes to manage and improve individual and team performance.