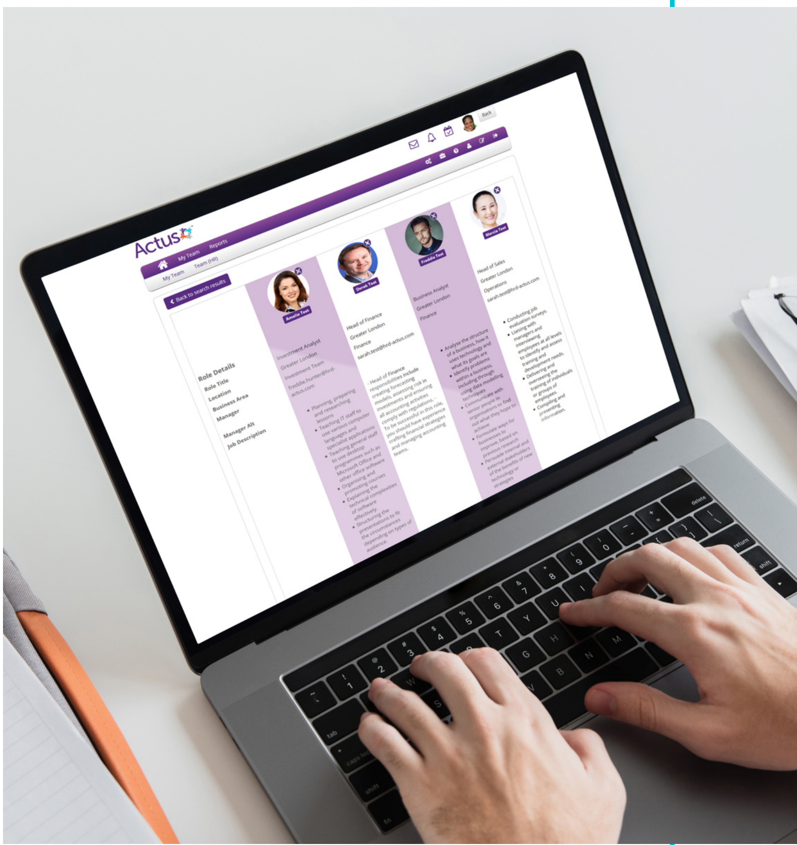
THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO 360 FEEDBACK

E-BOOK



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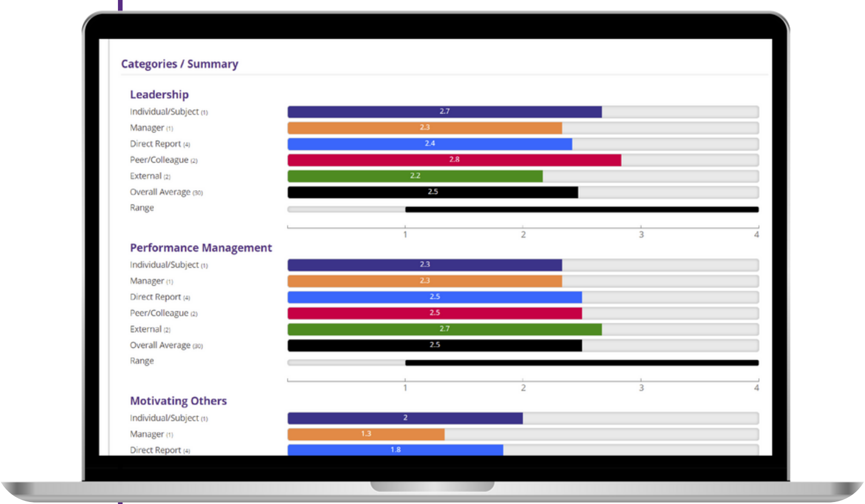
INTRODUCTION

360 feedback is an incredibly powerful but often misunderstood tool. The purpose of this guide is to explain how 360 feedback is best positioned in an organisation – as a development rather than a performance evaluation tool. I will explain how to avoid some of the common pitfalls associated with 360 feedback as well as outlining the key criteria for success.

This guide will explain what 360 is and how to use it strategically rather than tactically. It will also cover the practicalities around question design and the importance of positioning feedback and coaching when providing the feedback to the recipient. 360 feedback is incredibly valuable in the right hands and this guide is designed to provide you with all you need to know to manage it responsibly.



WHAT IS 360 FEEDBACK?

It seems obvious, but many people don't actually know why 360 feedback is so termed. The idea is that an individual (subject) receives feedback from people all around them in the organisational hierarchy, hence 360. So, respondents from above - their manager or senior colleagues; to the side – peers or customers and below – direct reports or junior colleagues. The benefit of this is that it provides a 360 degree perspective on how the subject's behaviours are viewed or come across and can provide great insight as different groups of respondents may view the same subject differently.

HOW IS 360 FEEDBACK BEST POSITIONED?

My strong preference is to use 360 as a development rather than an assessment tool and to couple it with a one-to-one coaching feedback session. Despite the fact that some organisations like to use it for assessment, considering that it is more objective than manager/self-assessment of performance, there are definite risks if used for assessment. The first one is the potential bias of the respondents, whether positive or negatively swayed, they are still only providing a subjective view of performance which would be better demonstrated through SMART objectives and aligned evidence. The second issue is outlined in research by the CIPD in their report 'Could do better? Assessing what works in performance management'. Here they outline the fact that people rate less honestly if they perceive that their rating will affect their salary, bonus or career progression. The same research showed that people were most honest if they perceived the feedback would be used for development. Therefore, it stands to reason that 360 is best used as a constructive and positive development tool that if coupled with coaching is a very powerful way of increasing self-awareness and motivating positive change.

Example 360 Report

Respondent Summary Table

This shows responses to each question by respondent type.

	Question	Line Manager	Direct Report	Colleague Peer	Individual Subject	Overall Average
Adaptability	Adapts style to get the best out of team members	2.0	3.0	3.7	3.0	2.5
	Refocuses team on new goals in changing circumstances	3.7	3.0	3.0	3.0	2.6
	Manages team wellbeing, supporting them to cope with pressure and change	3.0	3.0	3.0	2.7	2.5
	Maintains positivity and focus in the face of change	3.3	3.3	4.0	4.0	2.8
Communication	Encourages open, positive relationships between and within the team	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.3	2.5
	Provides regular feedback and recognition	3.3	2.7	3.0	3.0	2.5
	Fosters an environment where people feel valued and respected	3.0	3.0	3.3	3.7	2.6

Using 360 Feedback as a development tool rather than an assessment tool is more effective.

WHAT DOES A 360 FEEDBACK REPORT LOOK LIKE?

Typically, feedback is provided in the form of a report. The different groups of respondents are invited to respond to the same set of questions, usually anonymously (more on this later). This report will include quantitative (graphical) and qualitative (descriptive) feedback against each question categorised by respondent type. The questions are typically themed on specific criteria or competencies depending on the purpose of the feedback. You can see an example on the left. Usually, just the manager and the subject's own responses are individually distinguishable in the bar graphs and other responses are amalgamated. Written comments are usually not attributed at all to encourage more honesty.

POTENTIAL PITFALLS TO AVOID

The quality of feedback given can be an indication of the maturity of an organisation and it is important to provide the right education and messaging around the purpose of the 360 feedback. Many people are nervous and unskilled in providing feedback, particularly written, and this is something to be alert to and to emphasise the importance of being constructive. Some of the most damaging feedback can be given by unskilled line managers and if you are rolling out a company-wide 360 feedback programme I would recommend starting top down. By starting with the most senior people in the organisation you expose them to the experience of receiving feedback and the sense of vulnerability that this can generate. It helps them realise the value of coaching, careful feedback and quality comments, making them more likely to model these responses when asked to provide feedback to their team.

As I mentioned earlier, responses are usually anonymised as much as possible and I would certainly recommend this as attributable responses can hinder people from providing written comments which provide invaluable insight into why someone has rated a certain way. Our Actus 360 suggests inviting at least 5 respondents and will not generate a report without a minimum number of responses (default 3) in a category to ensure this anonymity is preserved.

BEING STRATEGIC ABOUT 360 FEEDBACK

It is helpful to take a step back at this stage and consider why you want to invest in 360 feedback in the first place. We shouldn't just do it because someone suggested it or thinks it is a good idea. It is helpful to consider first what the strategic purpose is, as this will feed into the process, the numbers involved and the types of questions asked.

As earlier outlined, 360 feedback is best used for personal development and is particularly appropriate for more senior people in an organisation who have been through all the typical training courses and want a more personalised development plan. It could also be used as a gateway for career progression e.g. a more objective way of judging aspiring partners in a professional services firm. It could also be valuable as part of an assessment centre and where people are applying for specific roles. It is important to ensure that your questions are relevant to the role and level that people are aspiring to, so you can use 360 to identify relevant development gaps.

Another legitimate strategic purpose might be around culture change or wanting to embed new or existing values more thoroughly in your organisation. The key is that 360 feedback is really about assessing and measuring the style and frequency of behaviours that we demonstrate in the workplace. It is not a tool to measure skill or absolute ability.

Having decided what the strategic purpose of the 360 is you should also consider how you want to manage it in your organisation, for example, the levels of confidentiality or visibility. In my experience, the best approach is to position it as a development tool that will be viewed by the individual and their coach or feedback giver as this reduces some of the anxiety that people have about receiving feedback. I would then recommend that the individual (having received their personalised feedback session) shares it with their line manager in their own time. Obviously, if the 360 is part of an assessment process then it needs to be visible to those doing the assessment. Whatever the level of visibility, it is important to be open and honest about this and to keep it to a minimum as it is potentially sensitive data.

WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE 360 PROCESS

I mentioned earlier that 360 feedback is best coupled with a one-to-one feedback session and I would go so as to say don't roll out 360 feedback in your organisation unless you can afford to invest in one-to-one feedback to support it. This should be from a neutral coach or development professional whether external or internal. The important thing is that the individual feels safe to discuss the feedback and any potential development outcomes.

Other things to consider are how many people you are going to put through 360 feedback at one time. Will it be ad hoc or in cohorts? If in cohorts, it is important to be realistic about timeframes and to consider whether one line manager for example is going to receive 15 requests for 360 feedback within a short period of time. I would recommend phasing an organisation-wide rollout in 3-6 week blocks and, as mentioned before start at the most senior and work down so that they understand the process and the importance of quality feedback and are more likely to model that behaviour.

Provide guidance about the types and numbers of feedback givers to invite e.g. don't just invite your mates, but equally don't invite people who don't know or work with you regularly. Recommend inviting 5-8 people per category to provide well rounded but not overly diluted feedback.

Be prepared to communicate to the wider organisation about the 360 process; the purpose; levels of anonymity and the importance of responding in a timely and constructive fashion. The level and quantity of responses are likely to improve over time as the organisation matures and people start to trust and value the process.

DESIGNING YOUR 360 QUESTIONS

In terms of the 360 report, it is important to select the right type of questions for the subject and they need to be relevant to their position and seniority so you should select a suitable template or build questions that are relevant to the purpose of the 360 (more on this later).

There is no point in asking irrelevant questions and I would also recommend capping the number of questions asked at 30 because respondents simply become fatigued, and the quality of their responses will reduce over about 20-25 questions. Less can be more, so try to avoid overlapping questions. Another pitfall to avoid is overly long questions that may be asking more than one thing.

This may seem convenient to keep the question count down but can be confusing when interpreting the feedback e.g. This person frequently provides specific, timely and constructive feedback in a sensitive, coaching style. A respondent may react positively or negatively to a single word in that sentence and answer it in relation to the frequency, quality or delivery style of feedback so it can end up raising more questions than giving answers. Better questions might be: 'Delivers specific, constructive feedback' or 'Demonstrates a coaching style by asking open questions and listening'. Where possible avoid value judgements in questions by using expressions like 'Is a good listener' and try to ask questions that are more objective and observable. Also, be careful to word questions positively so people are rating the frequency or visibility of positive behaviour.

If you think back to the visual of the report on page 3 generally the further to the right the responses the better the feedback.. It is counter-intuitive visually for it to be seen as positive for someone to rarely demonstrate a certain behaviour e.g. 'Rarely meets deadlines' or could be confusing e.g. 'Never loses their temper'.

The same applies to ratings, try to avoid value judgements like good or bad. You can use a strongly disagree to strongly agree scale or, I prefer Rarely demonstrates to Always demonstrates as this is asking about the visibility of behaviours. Don't offer too many rating options in the scale and try to ensure that they are distinct enough. For example, many people struggle to differentiate between 'Sometimes' and 'Occasionally'. I find a five-point scale tends to work pretty well in 360 feedback as people rarely demonstrate a bias towards the central rating if the questions are worded constructively.

We offer a selection of pre-defined ratings and question templates within our **Actus 360 NOW product.** that already meet these criteria. You can also download our Actus competency dictionary for free here which lists a number of behavioural statements that can be used within a 360 template.

STRUCTURING A 360 FEEDBACK SESSION

Structuring the 360 feedback session well is incredibly important and if you have a number of feedback givers or coaches supporting your 360 project, it is important to ensure that they all take a consistent approach. I would recommend allowing at least 45-90 minutes for a 360 feedback session depending on complexity. It is so important to go through all of the first five points before every feedback session and to ensure that all feedback givers do it consistently. By running through these points up front it means that you can ensure that feedback is received constructively and protect the recipient from any emotional fallout if the feedback is disappointing in some way. Hopefully you will find the following structure helpful for consistency.

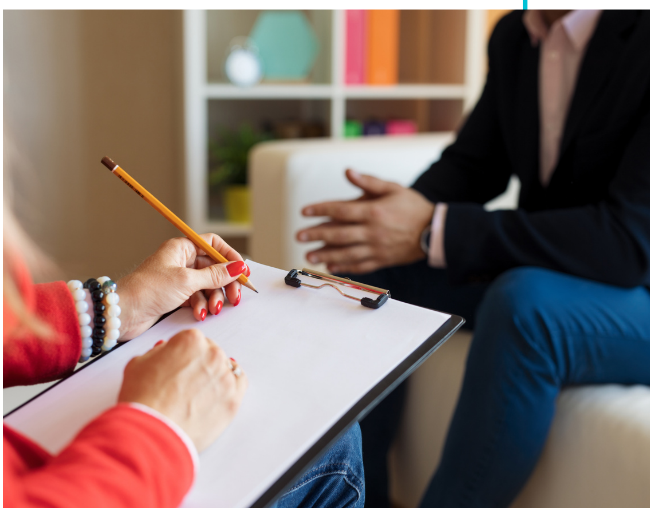
Step 1. Position your role and confidentiality

Start the feedback session by positioning your role as coach and feedback giver. If you are external to the organisation or already work in a learning role it is easier for you to be seen as neutral. However, if you are an HR professional or line manager people may be a little more suspicious or nervous about opening up to you.

Therefore, start by positioning your role as coach for the purpose of this feedback session and reassuring the individual of confidentiality. You can perhaps explain the fact that the feedback is for their eyes only and that you recommend that they choose to share it with their line manager after the session but make it clear that you won't be sharing the feedback with anyone else OR explain who will get to see the feedback and why, if different.

Step 2. Ask how they are feeling about the feedback and how they selected their respondents

These questions are really useful to get a sense of where this person's head is in relation to the feedback. If they say they are feeling really confident, excited or nervous, this gives you a useful indication of their self-confidence levels and you can position the session accordingly. Clearly, it is helpful if you have had time to review the individual's report and understand whether it is generally positive or whether there might be some difficult messages to digest. Depending on your assessment of the tone of feedback and the individual's receptiveness to the feedback will allow you to decide whether to manage expectations or challenge more robustly. So, someone who is nervous about receiving honest feedback may have just gone out to a small number of people they know well or may have only invited some of their direct reports rather than all of them. This is going to provide less balanced feedback than someone who has thought carefully and invited a wide selection of feedback givers, including some they think they have a more difficult relationship with.



STRUCTURE A 360 FEEDBACK SESSION

Step 3. Manage expectations

This is particularly important if you know that there is some challenging feedback within the report and is one of the main reasons that I advocate so strongly for personalised one-to-one feedback rather than just sending reports out. By following on from the questions in step 2, to explore the relationship with each feedback giver or to ask what sort of feedback they are expecting from those they invited to respond, you can use this as an opportunity to manage expectations, if needed. So, if for example you have seen that the manager has provided lower scores than others, it is helpful to explore their relationship with their line manager before sharing the feedback. You may find that they are a new manager and don't know them so well or they have a difficult relationship. If this is the case you can prepare them for the fact that this may be reflected in the feedback by saying something like: "So your manager hasn't had a lot of time to see you demonstrate all the behaviours yet/get to know you fully?".

4. Position feedback and bias

I always explain that feedback is incredibly helpful, but ultimately it reflects the perceptions of others rather than reality. I state that the feedback should be respected and valued, but ultimately it is down to the individual to decide whether it is helpful and the extent to which it needs to be taken on board or acted upon. As the coach, it is your role to ensure that the feedback is helpful and not damaging, that you challenge the individual if they are dismissing it but support them if they are taking it too personally.

Emphasise the reality that some people are naturally high or low markers – just like teachers at school and that it is more important to look for trends than absolute scores. This is particularly important with scores from individually identifiable raters like the line manager.

Explain the risk of recency bias where feedback can be distorted positively or negatively by a recent experience so if they just had a blazing row with somebody and then asked them to complete their feedback it is likely to be less positive than it would otherwise have been.

Finally, end on the fact that while the feedback is merely a reflection of how our behaviours are interpreted by others, this doesn't mean that it's not incredibly valuable. This is because we can choose to change our behaviour or stay the same should we wish. Feedback provides us with self-awareness and choices for the future.

5. Outline the feedback process

Having set the scene, explain how you will go through the report. I generally find that starting with a high-level overview such as a spider graph or summary is helpful. Overall, emphasise that the purpose is to look for themes rather than anomalies and that it is just as important to look for strengths as well as development areas. It is also important not to get hung up on who might have said certain statements and focus on the overall messages. Explain that you will finish the session by identifying a couple of key strengths and how you can utilise them more and also a couple of **areas for development.**

STRUCTURING A 360 FEEDBACK SESSION

6. Deliver the feedback

The key here is to get a general overview and then drill into any gaps. Use open questions to gauge how the individual is feeling and read their non-verbal cues to determine how and when to explore things further. Remember that your role is to ensure that the feedback is helpful and insightful and never damaging. Be prepared to challenge if clear messages are being ignored but also support if certain perspectives appear isolated and/or unhelpful. Coaching experience and skills are invaluable at this stage.

7. Summarise and close

Close the session by agreeing on the strengths and development areas and where and how these will be acted on or supported. Discuss next steps in terms of sharing the 360 with the appropriate audience.

Conclusion

360 feedback is a hugely powerful development tool but needs careful management and a commitment to investing in proper feedback and support to ensure that the individual gains from it. Generating a 360 report is only a small part of the process and providing a report directly to the individual without coaching support risks even well-meaning feedback being damaging and creating long term ramifications for the individual and the organisation.

If you want to roll out 360 feedback in your organisation, ensure that you have the resource or budget to support it with the right coaching and development support to make it a powerful rather than destructive tool.

With all the above caveats in place, don't be put off from using 360 as a strategic, cultural development tool. With the right questions, process and intent it is probably the most effective way of promoting positive behavioural and cultural change at an individual and ultimately organisational level.

FURTHER RESOURCES

- 360 slides
- Podcast
- Competency Dictionary