360 Surveys: Not Created Equal

Growing leaders or achieving organizational change is difficult without good feedback systems for employees. Direct open feedback, however, is typically in short supply in most organizations. For this reason, the 360 survey that provides developmental feedback to employees from the people who surround them is a tool that the vast majority of Fortune 500 companies use today in some form or another to rate and develop their people.

Feedback from fellow employees is the most credible and often the most useful. Without some formal structure, however, such as the 360 survey, most employees are reluctant to give feedback to their peers.

Best 360s Are Customized

Not all 360 surveys are created equal, nor do they yield equally useful results. The best 360s are customized to the company's key behavioral competencies, important change initiatives and company values. Customized 360s can also address the unique characteristics of each company and business situation, and can be modified as new issues grow in importance.

The metrics for 360s can vary, but most typical 360s are scored on a rating scale of 1-5. The main problem with these linear rating scales is average rater bias, where raters choose the middle ground as a safety precaution. Of course, not all raters are created equal, and often it is difficult to get the desired level of objectivity and confidentiality from raters.

Paired Comparison Approach

These challenges can be addressed by using a measurement system that requires a paired comparison of survey items. In a paired comparison 360, individual behaviors are rated by comparing one behavior to another to determine which is stronger. It yields a final ranking of the person's strengths and weaknesses, with specific scores for each behavior, resulting in a ranking of work behaviors from highest to lowest.

This approach reduces the problem of rater bias and creates greater objectivity, reliability and, thus, accuracy in ratings. The paired comparison format can easily be customized, translated and placed online for ease of administration. It allows for individual and group comparisons with greater statistical accuracy.

The paired comparison approach prevents someone from being rated as good or bad at everything. Instead, it identifies and ranks the strengths and the weaknesses of the person being rated. It also carefully narrows the focus so that the feedback emphasizes a smaller number of areas on which to focus for development. This avoids information overload, which is a hazard in typical 360s.

The best use of 360 surveys is for development. Too often, the 360 becomes an end in itself, and employees are left not knowing what to do now that they have all this feedback.

Customized development plans are critical for success in any effective 360 survey system. The development plan should emphasize goal setting with a list of developmental activities that include on-the-job projects, as well as specific suggestions for behavioral changes that employees can try. Noticeable behavior change comes from an emphasis on the application of lessons learned rather than reading books and attending seminars.

Important Tool for Change and Development

360s have become increasingly popular, but despite good intentions, they are too often poorly designed and poorly executed. When they are customized to the specific needs of the employee and business situation, they can be an important tool for creating organizational change, leadership development and a continuous learning business culture.

As the saying goes, we treasure what we measure. By measuring employees' behavioral changes through a paired comparison 360 survey, you will send a clear message that targeted change is treasured by the organization.

For more information on the paired comparison Motivator 360, visit the PSP Metrics website (www.pspmetrics.com).

Benefits of a Paired Comparison 360
- Easily customized
- Acknowledges key strengths
- Easy to interpret
- No data overload
- Encourages development
- Measures continuous improvement
- Reduces ratee defensiveness
- Improves accuracy of ratings
- Provides a group report
- Focuses on what matters most in your business