
May 2009

360° feedback from all angles

Findings from a roundtable discussion
hosted by ETS



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ETS hosted a roundtable on 360° feedback for 15 HR professionals across a range of industries. It was clear from the discussion that multi-rater feedback is being used in diverse ways: from changing the culture to performance appraisal. Organisations have each adapted the technique to their unique circumstances and needs, leading to some novel solutions for common issues. This document focuses on three of these: whether 360° feedback should be anonymous, how to stop feedback overwhelming raters and showing return on investment. The seminar was held under the Chatham House rule and all comments have been anonymised.

These roundtables take place on a regular basis and are highly valued, according to delegates' feedback. HR professionals wishing to attend future seminars should contact ETS using the email address info@etsplc.com.

Should feedback be attributed?

While the feedback from almost all 360° programmes is confidential, one participant put forward a strong case for attributing it. The decision depends on the initial feedback culture and also the objectives set for the 360° programme.

Of the examples where feedback is anonymous, these two typify the benefits:

- One HR professional described the employee population of her insurance firm as being close-knit and drawn from a small cadre of people, many of whom have a family connection to the industry. In this polite and reserved culture, the quality of feedback would suffer if it was attributed, she noted.
- A global professional services firm represented at the discussion also uses anonymous feedback. While partners and department heads can select their raters, comments are solicited from *everyone* in the firm. This overcomes the potential for bias when senior individuals select people similar to themselves as raters. Making the company-wide feedback confidential provides “possibly the only opportunity some people have to be give negative feedback. [Many people] would never come to a partner and give that feedback.”

Without confidentiality,
some people would
never give feedback

In direct contrast, transparent feedback is an essential ingredient of a management programme among the leadership population of a major support services company. The 360° programme was introduced alongside coaching and talent management with feedback attributed from the outset. The programme’s owner commented that, “Those initiatives would have failed if we didn’t get openness. 360 was another tool to hammer that change.”

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He noted that feedback in the first cycle was either bland or highly critical but was constructive and high-quality by the second, helped by coaching skills. “We had to go through a bit of pain and force it to get people to put their names down. It’s completely changed things. Even the CEO, who was a bit cynical at the beginning, is into it now.”

One petrochemical company is taking a middle path whereby raters can elect whether or not they are happy to talk directly to the person they are appraising.

In summary, while some people would strongly advocate transparency in feedback, others have compelling reasons to adopt the confidential approach.

How to stop feedback overwhelming your raters

A concern expressed by several participants was that raters become overwhelmed with requests for feedback, particularly during appraisal season. Described as a 'cottage industry' by one, the consequences are disgruntled raters, rushed and poor-quality comments and raters having to decline to give feedback.

A representative of ETS suggested a number of approaches to 'rater burden', acknowledging that each organisation would need to find its own solution based on their specific needs and context. The approaches were:

- Limit the number of people that each individual can select for feedback. Participants suggested a figure of between six and nine colleagues.
- Develop a questionnaire that takes some 10-12 minutes to complete, which still allows space for a mixture of closed (numerical) and open (free text) responses. One professional services firm uses a single, short, numbers-only questionnaire within its performance management process, which takes less than ten minutes to complete.
- The online 360° solution should help identify when raters are being overloaded, based on parameters relevant to that company and programme. For example, it can display to the employee how many other people have asked that rater for feedback, either disallowing or advising them against selecting individuals with more than a set number of feedback requests.
- Managers can approve the list of raters for their group to identify individuals at risk of being over-whelmed with feedback requests.
- Raters can be given the authority to decline to give feedback, perhaps providing a rationale and possibly with oversight from a manager or process owner.

The online solution should help identify when reviewers are being overloaded

It was clear that it would require a mix of approaches to meet the needs of all the organisations present. As one participant concluded, "It's all about your context."

Creating and demonstrating return on investment

One of the main questions that participants tabled for discussion was how to show return on investment. Techniques put forward to show value were greeted with a note of caution: using financial models to make an HR business case is likely to attract the critical attention of the finance department.

As an alternative way to demonstrate return on investment, ETS outlined the Kirkpatrick model of training evaluation, which describes escalating levels of behavioural change from 'reaction' to 'impact', where the programme has led to the participant changing their behaviour to the extent that it is impacting individuals, groups and, potentially, the whole organisation.

Level	Type	Anticipated change
One	Reaction (Passive)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Satisfaction and awareness
Two	Learning (Active)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Knowledge and understandingBeliefs and thinking differentlyFeeling, attitudes, aspirations
Three	Behaviour (Active)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Willingness to try new behavioursActual behaviour changes
Four	Impact (Conclusive)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Effect of behaviour changes on individualsEffect of behavioural change on groups

Based on DL Kirkpatrick. Evaluating training programs: the four levels. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler 1994.

ETS gave examples of evidence that can be collected at levels three and four:

- Surveys before and after the 360 and associated interventions. One petrochemical company sends raters an email after an initial 360 cycle that asks them to observe the individual on their three development areas over a six-month period. These raters then score the individual again but using an improvement scale rather than with the 'frequency of behaviour' scale used in the original 360.
- Changes in scores for managers in the all-company survey, which can be strengthened as a measure by comparing managers who have received feedback and subsequent interventions with a matched control group, an approach that is similar to a clinical trial.
- Longitudinal analysis of group 360 scores to uncover whether behaviours have moved in a favourable direction, as reported by one financial services company.

There was a lot of support for making the case for 360° feedback without resorting to a number-based business case. One participant identified HR as needing to be champions for their programmes, saying: “The objective of 360 is to change something, but it needs driving and HR tends to shy away from challenge. 360 challenges you personally and the organisation. If you don’t challenge, there will never be a return.”

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The use of anecdote to make the case for 360 was popular. A participant said of introducing an emotional intelligence 360 into a mining firm that “the change was phenomenal, even 4,000 feet underground.”

About ETS

ETS designs, develops and hosts performance management, 360-degree feedback and employee research solutions for world-leading UK and international companies. ETS delivers each client their ‘ideal world’ by developing a solution to meet their exact needs. Our customers include Allianz, Centrica, Coca-Cola Enterprises, House of Fraser, Ikea, Johnson Matthey, Land Securities, National Trust, Rexam, Thomas Cook and Virgin Atlantic.

ETS delights its customers through creating their ideal world solutions and through excellent customer service. You can access written and video case studies of ETS clients at www.etsplc.com.

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