

360 Degree Feedback Surveys and Our Readiness for Change

The main purpose of training is to help people change or improve their effectiveness. Achieving this objective often involves attempting to change people's beliefs about their current behavior. Individuals who profit most from 360-degree feedback are those who suspect they have a problem. Feedback acts as a clarification of their previous suspicions. These insights, however, do not automatically lead to change.

There are three components that make change likely:

- Tangible, visible data, or evidence that change is needed
- Recognition of the need to change on the part of the learner, and
- The motivation to do so.

360 -degree surveys provide believable data and create awareness that change may be needed. People, though, have strong, built in systems of self-defense to remain the same (not change) and will do almost anything to protect their self-image or self-esteem. Fear of repercussions or belief that the results of their 360 will be used as part of the performance management process fuel the fire. And besides, improvement means change, and change is hard work.

Effective survey design can create a strong motivation to improve while also creating a higher readiness to apply the ideas and concepts presented in the training program. A key reason to use the 360-degree assessment survey is to help an individual better understand their current strengths and developmental needs. After gathering information about individuals, it is possible to consolidate the information into a Group Composite. This becomes a benchmark by which to measure and compare the same group's performance in the future. You can also use the 360-degree survey to prove people's performance has improved after the training.

Readiness to Change

In "In Search of How People Change," Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross identified five stages—precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance—through which individuals cycled (and often recycled) in order to change behavior successfully.

Prochaska and his colleagues observed that certain change techniques were helpful at some stages of change but not at all helpful at others. For example, people at the precontemplation stage did not believe they had a problem, therefore, feedback might be lost on them. People at the contemplation stage were aware a problem existed, they were serious about wanting to overcome it, however, they had not yet made a commitment to act. Their research showed that it was at the contemplation stage when people were most helped by consciousness-raising activities such as 360-degree feedback. People at the action stage were taking serious steps to

modify their behavior and were helped to change through supportive relationships and processes that reinforced their autonomy and willpower.

There is a critical transition period between gaining insight and taking action. Prochaska et al. refer to this rather fragile period as the preparation stage, which combines intention and action. It is a critical stage in which individuals plan for change and begin taking modest steps to try out new behavior. This is the juncture at which many 360-degree processes break down.

Often individuals receive feedback and do not know how to interpret the results in light of their everyday relationships with their co-workers. Further, if they receive no training or support to reinforce new behaviors, the demands of change may be too great. They may not have sufficient will to persevere with the change, particularly if they perceive they are not being held accountable to change. When 360-degree feedback is not shared with an individual's manager, lack of accountability can be a major deterrent to change.

Accountability for Change

Typically, 360-degree feedback is used for either developmental or performance appraisal purposes. If used for development, it is common practice that participation is voluntary and feedback is confidential—not given to a participant's manager. Accountability rests with the individual's desire to change. For instance, in "Enhancing 360-degree Feedback for Senior Executives," published by the Center for Creative Leadership, Kaplan and Palus report that when 360-degree feedback is used for development it is the policy of the Center that "the executive owns the results, and the confidentiality of the results is a priority."

When feedback is used for performance appraisal purposes and is available to a participant's manager, accountability for change is increased. In studies of the effectiveness of multisource feedback, London, Smither, and Adsit found that feedback had little impact on change when ratees were not accountable for using the feedback. However, historically, organizations have been reluctant to ask individuals to reveal their scores to their managers, fearing the individual would be too organizationally vulnerable. Some critics of sharing 360-degree feedback results with a participant's manager contend that doing so interferes with raters' willingness to be candid or objective in completing the feedback inventories and, therefore, skews the results. Accountability rests solely with individuals, however. Feedback has little impact without a culture of safety where management acts as 'coach,' acknowledges their direct reports' stage of readiness and provides resources to support behavior change.

Clearly, the organizational context, culture, and systems in which the individual receives

feedback is important to the success of a 360-degree process. Therefore, for change within an organization, a model of change that only addresses individuals' readiness to change is insufficient. Managers' motivation to change will be highly influenced by factors within their organizations. If there is inadequate support and emphasis from senior management expressing the urgency for change, the perceived need for an individual to be accountable for change based on 360-degree feedback will be seriously diluted. Both readiness and accountability are needed for change to occur.

Culture and Change

The values that underlie an organization's culture may also make change difficult. Kotter recommends that change become anchored in the culture as the final step in instituting an organization's change process. If a leader's vision for change is at cross-purposes with long and deeply held organizational values, change may not "hold" once the urgency for change is relaxed. For example, if an organization has historically embraced an authoritarian, command and control leadership philosophy, attempts to gain improved interpersonal skills might not receive encouragement and support long enough for an individual to cycle through the stages of change—particularly through action and maintenance. The time required for individual and organization change—usually years—is often underestimated. And frequently in the rush to implement change, the vital link between organizational values, the need for a culture in which it is safe to have a crucial conversation, and the readiness for change is overlooked.

Efforts to improve or change begin only after a person learns and accepts that their current practices need development, limit their effectiveness or prevent them from obtaining something important. Receiving clear, specific 360 degree feedback from several believable sources helps people understand their true strengths and developmental needs better than any other learning tool or method. Training programs and workshops that use 360 degree assessment surveys effectively will normally produce more change or improvement than workshops without 360 degree surveys. 360 degree assessment surveys help people better understand what specific changes will benefit them, and are one of the most effective tools available today, letting us focus on helping people become ready to make the changes needed to improve their effectiveness.

Works Cited

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