Coming Full Circle
Using Research and Practice to Address 27 Questions About 360-Degree Feedback Programs

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The research evidence addressing practical issues faced when implementing a 360-degree feedback system are reviewed. Notwithstanding the popularity and apparent utility of 360-degree feedback programs, there is a need for clearer translations of research-based knowledge into recommendations for practically applying such programs. This article uses the published research studies that have been conducted on 360-degree feedback programs to address 27 specific questions that often arise in the development, implementation, administration, and interpretation of multisource feedback programs.

Three hundred sixty-degree feedback represents a relatively new and promising innovation in human resource (HR) management. Also known as multisource feedback, 360-degree feedback has been defined as "evaluations gathered about a target participant from two or more rating sources, including self, supervisor, peers, direct reports, internal customers, external customers, and vendors or suppliers" (Dalessio, 1998, p. 278). The popularity of such feedback programs has grown dramatically, with well over 100 scholarly and practitioner-oriented articles published since 1990. In addition, it has been reported that 90% of Fortune 1000 firms use some form of multisource assessment (Atwater & Waldman, 1998).

Notwithstanding the popularity and apparent utility of such 360-degree feedback programs, there is a need for clearer translations of research and practice-based knowledge of such programs. That is, integrating the scientific literature on 360-degree feedback programs with the practical issues faced when designing and implementing such programs could enhance our knowledge and effective application of such programs. The current article addresses this need by spanning the boundary between science and practice and applying research and practice-based knowledge to the questions faced by practitioners involved in 360-degree feedback programs. The article "comes full circle" by using research evidence to deal with questions that arise with 360-degree programs. Influential articles from academic and practitioner sources were reviewed to identify the current state-of-the-art in 360-degree feedback. What results is a consideration of the issues that arise when developing, implementing, and interpreting 360-degree feedback programs.

This review is organized around 27 specific questions summarized in Figure 1. The

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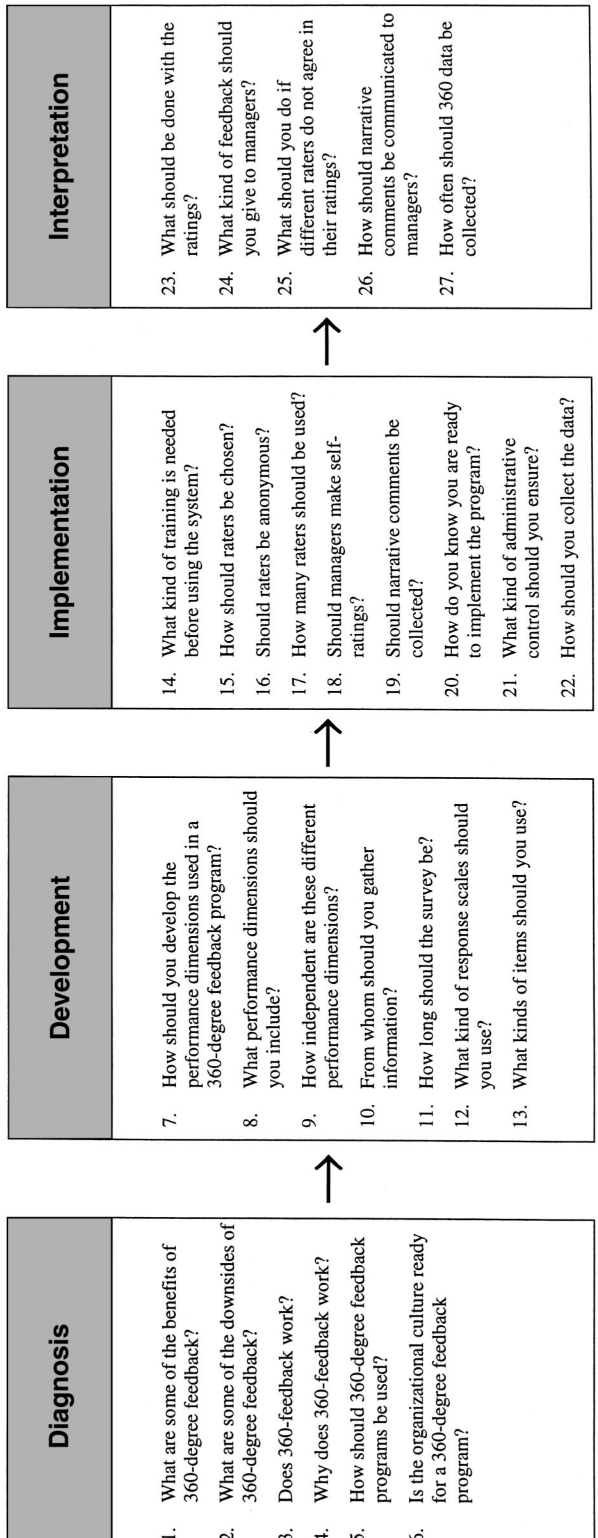

Figure 1. Common questions in diagnosing, developing, implementing, and interpreting 360-degree feedback programs.

first set of questions help determine if a 360-degree feedback program is likely to be appropriate, ranging from identifying the benefits and downsides of these programs to understanding how they should be used. The second section addresses questions that arise when developing a 360-degree feedback program. These range from the nature of performance dimensions to the kinds of items that should be used in a feedback survey. The third section covers the range of questions to consider when implementing 360-degree feedback programs, from understanding training requirements to discussing how many raters should be used. The final section concerns questions arising when interpreting and using 360-degree feedback programs, such as what kind of feedback should be given to managers and how to evaluate the program's effectiveness.

Diagnosing Appropriateness of 360-Degree Feedback Programs

1. What Are Some of the Benefits of 360-Degree Feedback?

A number of articles have dealt with the various benefits of 360-degree feedback programs, including Antonioni (1996), Bernardin and Beatty (1987), Hoffman (1995), London and Beatty (1993), and London and Smither (1995). Perhaps the key point about 360-degree feedback is that subordinates and others are in a good position to observe and evaluate managerial performance. It is a psychometric axiom that multiple assessments can increase reliability and validity. In addition, including multiple views is consistent with organizational philosophies of employee involvement and commitment. It has been suggested that the use of 360-degree feedback can (a) open up candid discussion on undesired work behaviors from sole concern with supervisor evaluation to also being concerned with peer and subordinate evaluation, (b) increase formal and informal feedback, (c) increase management learning, (d) increase the focus on customer service, (e) encourage goal setting and skill development, (f) call attention to important performance dimensions heretofore neglected, (g) change corporate culture, and finally, as a result of the above, (h) improve managerial behavior and effectiveness (Antonioni, 1996; Bernardin & Beatty, 1987; Hoffman, 1995; London & Beatty, 1993).

2. What Are Some of the Downsides of 360-Degree Feedback?

Although 360-degree feedback interventions have many possible benefits, it is also true that there are a number of potential downsides to such programs. These potential drawbacks should also be taken into account when considering such a program. Potential risks include the fact that such systems can be costly to develop and implement in terms of monetary resources as well as manager and subordinate time. Also, the feedback might not be truthful, either too positive or too negative, and honest feedback can sometimes hurt, generating tension between the manager and raters (London & Beatty, 1993; Vinson, 1996).

3. Does 360-Degree Feedback Work?

Research has examined the long-term outcomes of 360-degree feedback programs. In perhaps the first widely cited study, Hegarty (1974) found that managers who received upward feedback about their supervisory behavior significantly improved their behavior and improved subordinate ratings of managerial performance. McEvoy and Buller (1987) found that employees were favorably disposed toward peer evaluation. Favorable user reactions were positively associated with satisfaction with prior peer ratings and negatively associated with perceived friendship bias and years of company experience.

Atwater, Roush, and Fischthal (1995) found that subordinate ratings of leadership were significantly higher following feedback from subordinates, but feedback with supervised practice (a highly structured session where leaders discussed the feedback results with subordinates) was not significantly different from feedback alone.

Smither et al. (1995) found that low- and medium-level performers improved and high performers declined over time. Some of this result was due to regression to mean, but not all of it was. However, managers who received feedback were no more likely to improve performance than managers who did not receive feedback.

In a follow-up to this study, Reilly, Smither, and Vasilopoulos (1996) examined four administrations of an upward feedback program over 2½ years. They found that managers evidenced a small performance improvement over time. Again, performance significantly improved for managers in the low-performance group but declined for managers in the high-performance group. They suggested that some (but not all) improvement was due to regression to the mean. Confirming the findings of Smither et al. (1995), they found that performance improvements were unrelated to the number of times managers received feedback.

Johnson and Ferstl (1999) found that people who gave themselves higher self-ratings than the ratings their subordinates gave them tended to improve over time. In-agreement raters tended to stay the same over time, and people at moderate to high levels of initial performance who gave themselves lower self-ratings than the ratings their subordinates gave them tended to decline over time.

Finally, Walker and Smither (1999) looked at changes in ratings over five annual administrations of an upward feedback program. As expected, managers' upward feedback scores improved over time, and managers who initially had the worst ratings improved the most (and this was not attributable to regression to the mean). They also found that improvement in subordinate ratings was greater for managers who discussed the previous year's feedback with subordinates than for managers who had not discussed ratings. Finally, managers improved more in years they held feedback meetings than in years they did not hold feedback meetings.

In summary, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that upward feedback can improve job performance, especially for those with initially low levels of performance.

4. Why Does 360-Degree Feedback Work?

One of the perplexing aspects of 360-degree feedback concerns the mechanisms by which it positively impacts managerial behavior. Several different theoretical explanations have been forwarded. For example, Smither et al. (1995) offered two possible explanations. First, they suggested that the introduction of a 360-degree feedback program signals that performance in certain areas being measured is important to the organization (e.g., teamwork). Feedback on items that describe specific behavior (e.g., "made me feel like a valued member of the team") enable managers to use the items to set specific goals (i.e., engage in more actions that include all subordinates in the team's activities). Second, Smither et al. (1995) suggested that managers who have the largest discrepancy between feedback and a performance standard will be the most motivated to change their behavior. This would suggest that managers who observe the largest difference between their own performance ratings and those of others (e.g., subordinates, peers) will demonstrate the largest performance gains.

More recently, Johnson and Ferstl (1999) predicted that when managers receive ratings lower than their self-ratings, they would be motivated to improve performance and reduce the discrepancy between how they perceive themselves and how others perceive them. If feedback is consistent with self-perceptions, managers may not be motivated to improve even if their performance is low. Similarly, if managers have subordinate ratings that exceed their own ratings, they would not be motivated to improve.

Each of these explanations has received some empirical research support. Keeping these underlying mechanisms in mind can aid in the design of 360-degree feedback programs. For example, recognizing the importance of the 360-degree program as a signal of important organizational goals highlights the importance of linking the performance dimensions to the organization's strategy.

5. How Should 360-Degree Feedback Programs Be Used?

There has been a great deal written on the ways in which 360-degree feedback information should be used (e.g., Antonioni, 1996; Atwater & Waldman, 1998; Bernardin, Dahmus, & Redmon, 1993; Johnson & Ferstl, 1999; Lepsinger & Lucia, 1997; London & Beatty, 1993; London & Smither, 1995; London, Wohlers, & Gallagher, 1990; McEvoy & Buller, 1987; Tornow, 1993b; Vinson, 1996; Walker & Smither, 1999).

Tornow (1993b) identified four possible uses of 360-degree feedback data. First, when used for *developmental purposes*, he noted that awareness of discrepancies between how we see ourselves and how others see us enhances self-awareness. This enhanced self-awareness is a key to maximum leadership performance and thus becomes a foundation for management and leadership development programs. Second, when used for *appraisal purposes*, he noted that sources other than immediate supervisors (e.g., customers, subordinates) have unique perspectives to provide. Third, when used for *assignment or selection purposes,* he suggested that 360-degree instruments enable systematic collection of inferences to be used by others for predicting future job success. Finally, to *facilitate organizational change*, 360-degree feedback can help an organizational intervention align leadership behavior with strategy.

Notwithstanding these varied purposes, the majority of literature reviewed used 360-degree feedback for developmental purposes. In fact, a number of the articles expressly warned against using 360-degree feedback for anything but managerial development. For example, Vinson (1996) suggested that 360-degree feedback *should not* be used to determine salaries or promotions. Bernardin et al. (1993) found that supervisors were generally supportive of subordinate appraisal as a useful source of data, except when used as a basis for determining pay (i.e., for appraisal or administrative purposes). Echoing this result, Antonioni (1996) noted that raters in his research expressed reluctance to use the information for merit raise decisions. In fact, the Center for Creative Leadership restricts the use of its published instrument to developmental purposes only.

Lepsinger and Lucia (1997) explained this warning by outlining the differences between development-oriented systems and appraisal-oriented systems. In development-oriented systems, data are the property of people being rated. They determine who sees the data and how the data will be used. In appraisal-oriented systems, however, the organization owns the data, and the data can be used in any manner dictated by the organization. In addition, there is a difference in the perception of what is at stake for the person receiving the feedback. In development-oriented systems, employees focus on improving skills. In appraisal-oriented systems, the focus is on getting good ratings and may not help identify weaknesses or skill deficiencies.

But others have suggested that 360-degree feedback can be used in a more administrative way. London and Smither (1995) conducted a telephone survey of 20 firms and found that although the majority of firms used 360-degree feedback for developmental purposes only, a substantial number of other firms are increasingly using 360-degree feedback for administrative purposes. Finally, Atwater and Waldman (1998) and London et al. (1990) suggested beginning the process by using 360-feedback developmentally and in a confidential way and giving people time to adjust to the notion that subordinates will rate managers.

6. Is the Organizational Culture Ready for a 360-Degree Feedback Program?

A handful of authors have talked about the importance of assessing whether the organizational culture is ready for a 360-degree feedback program. Atwater and Waldman (1998) suggested that an organization should assess readiness for use of 360-feedback as an appraisal device. They noted that employees need to feel comfortable with the process, and they need to believe they will be rated honestly and fairly. In addition, Waldman, Atwater, and Antonioni (1998) suggested that consultants or internal champions should be available to be accountable for results and customization. For their part, Moravec, Gyr, and Friedman (1993) identified a number of other questions or conditions that should be satisfactorily answered before implementing a program. These questions include the following:

- Does the culture view learning and changing as keys to success?
- Do employees feel free to speak up without fear of reprisal?
- Do managers view open communication as essential to a successful and flexible organization?
- Will managers use what they learn to make changes relevant to their personal and departmental success?
- Will managers discuss the results with employees so they can see that their input matters?

Developing the 360-Degree Feedback Program

7. How Should You Develop the Performance Dimensions Used in a 360-Degree Feedback Program?

Smither et al. (1995) interviewed 10 senior-level managers to develop their set of performance dimensions. A more sophisticated approach was taken by London et al. (1990), who described how designing a 360-degree feedback program represents a strategic opportunity. They noted that it is important to get input from employees at all levels. One way to accomplish this is to form a committee to write items and then perform a pilot survey with a large number of employees. London and Beatty (1993) recommended basing the performance dimensions on things strategic to organizational success. This can be done through a thorough job analysis, but they suggested one might also want to take the opportunity to be more strategic and forward looking. But at a minimum, they feel one should involve employees in program design.

8. What Performance Dimensions Should You Include?

A variety of different performance dimensions have been used in 360-degree feedback programs. To gain a better understanding of the nature of the dimensions that have been investigated, several studies were content analyzed (Antonioni, 1994; Johnson & Ferstl, 1999; Mount, Judge, Scullen, Sytsma, & Hezlett, 1998; Smither et al., 1995; Walker & Smither, 1999). The performance dimensions used by these authors evidenced considerable overlap, with the following list of dimensions present in one or more of these studies:

- Leadership
- Communications
- Planning and organizing
- Occupational and technical knowledge
- Informing

- Delegation/participation/empowerment
- Conflict management
- Listening
- Motivating others
- Human relations/people management
- People development/coaching/support
- Providing feedback
- Personal adaptability
- Problem analysis
- Oral communication
- Written communication
- Personal motivation
- Financial and quantitative
- Creating a team environment
- Fairness
- Integrity and respect
- Valuing diversity
- Personal organization and time management
- Commitment to quality/customer satisfaction

9. How Independent Are These Different Performance Dimensions?

Although a large number of different performance dimensions or categories have been identified, virtually every study has found very high intercorrelations among the different dimensions. As such, most published research has chosen to combine all the dimensions into one overall leadership measure. Although sound from a psychometric perspective, this does cause one to question the meaningfulness of such multidimensional conceptions of leadership. It is likely that many 360-degree feedback instruments suffer from halo error. However, when using the feedback for developmental purposes, it may not make sense to focus too much attention on a single overall score. This is because there are qualitative distinctions between the dimensions that may be useful for feedback purposes, and the correlations between the dimensions only account for approximately 50% of the variance, suggesting that there is considerable nonoverlap among the dimensions.

10. From Whom Should You Gather Information?

The 360-degree feedback programs reviewed collected information from a variety of sources, including supervisors, peers, subordinates, customers, and suppliers. For example, Mount et al. (1998) collected ratings from bosses, peers, and subordinates as well as self-ratings and concluded that each source provided partially unique information.

Supervisors are valuable sources of information because they are typically familiar with the job and are likely motivated to provide information to augment the subordinate's performance. However, supervisors may observe only a small part of the performance of each subordinate. Peers are likely to observe a high proportion of the employee performance, but they may not be motivated to provide accurate assessments. Subordinates provide a valuable perspective on managerial performance, but it is limited to those interactions that involve the supervisor. The same is true for information from customers and suppliers.

Given that each source provides unique assessments of performance with simultaneous limitations, it is typically advisable to obtain information from as many sources as possible. In fact, Bernardin et al. (1993) found that managers needed other data, in combination with subordinate data, to interpret the subordinate ratings (e.g., organizational survey data, other rating sources). That is, in the absence of other relevant information (e.g., how satisfied a subordinate was), it was difficult to interpret subordinate ratings. This suggests that data should be collected from as many sources as possible.

11. How Long Should the Survey Be?

There have been a variety of different opinions as to how long 360-degree feedback surveys should be. At one end, Bracken (1994) recommended keeping instruments to about 40–60 items because surveys that take longer than 10–15 minutes to complete are problematic. On the other hand, London et al. (1990) noted they have used *as few as* 60 items, with some surveys containing as many as 120–130 items.

12. What Kind of Response Scales Should You Use?

There are also conflicting opinions as to what sort of response scales should be used. Antonioni (1996) noted that raters desire information that conveys the expectations others have. Thus, he suggested using expectation scales coupled with written comments. Bracken (1994) recommended against using frequency scales but did suggest using scales that lack a midpoint. He, with London et al. (1990), advocated this because it avoids receiving only neutral ratings. They also felt a 6-point scale should be used because it spreads ratings out more.

London and Beatty (1993) have used both an expectation scale (e.g., what level of service should be provided by a department) as well as an actual performance scale (e.g., what level of service do you receive from a department). Smither et al. (1995) had raters evaluate behavior during the past 6 months using a 5-point extent scale, as did Johnson and Ferstl (1999). Finally, Dalessio (1998) suggested that agreement, satisfaction, and extent scales are all adequate, depending on the particular application.

13. What Kinds of Items Should You Use?

More consensus is found in discussions about the kinds of items that should be used. Many authors suggested making items as specific as possible (e.g., "Explains what results are expected when a task is assigned") and avoiding ratings of psychological traits (e.g., judgment, attitude, dependability, initiative; Bernardin & Beatty, 1987; Yukl & Lepsinger, 1995). Survey items should describe specific, observable behaviors. This provides more accurate and reliable ratings and provides a better basis for feedback. It also provides specific examples of desired behaviors that can serve as goals (London & Smither, 1995). In addition, behaviors should be framed in positive rather than negative terms. This makes feedback easier to take and tells managers what they should be doing (as opposed to what they should not be doing).

Implementing the 360-Degree Feedback Program

14. What Kind of Training Is Needed Before Using the System?

Most researchers agree that some form of training is needed prior to having people become involved in 360-degree feedback systems (Antonioni, 1996; Bracken, 1994; London & Beatty, 1993; Yukl & Lepsinger, 1995). Training can take two different forms: training for raters prior to data collection and training for appraisees when feedback reports are provided.

With respect to training before data collection, Antonioni (1996) and Bracken (1994) suggested that raters need training on how to make reliable and accurate ratings. They recommended both frame of reference and rater error training (e.g., halo, central tendency, leniency, severity). In addition, training should include a discussion of both how the survey instrument was created and how the information will be used, assurances of confidentiality, and instructions on how to complete the questionnaire.

Once feedback reports are provided, Antonioni (1996) suggested that appraisees need training in interpreting data and selecting improvement targets, handling feelings about negative feedback, discussing results with raters, and developing specific action plans. This training is particularly important given the range of different ways 360-degree feedback ratings can be used.

15. How Should Raters Be Chosen?

How to choose raters to be included in the 360-degree feedback program is another area where there has been some disagreement. Antonioni (1996) cautioned against allowing managers to select all the raters because they may pick only favorable raters. Instead, he suggested selecting raters on the basis of objective criteria, such as extent of interdependency and opportunity to observe peer behaviors. He suggested that the appraisee and supervisor should jointly select raters.

Vinson (1996) and Yukl and Lepsinger (1995) simply suggested that raters should be selected carefully. Feedback should be solicited from people who are in a position to accurately rate the manager. The sample should be representative of people in the manager's work unit. Finally, London et al. (1990) suggested that participation should be voluntary, and managers should select the raters.

Thus, the manager should be involved in the selection of raters, but every attempt should be made to assure that the raters are representative of the manager's constituents. This is particularly important in light of the research suggesting that programs are most effective when the managers' self-ratings are more favorable than the constituent ratings (Johnson & Ferstl, 1999). That is, if a manager selects only raters likely to provide positive ratings, it is less likely that there will be a gap between the ratings and therefore less motivation to improve. Involving someone other than the manager in the selection of raters would increase the likelihood of having representative raters.

16. Should Raters Be Anonymous?

The anonymity of raters has been the subject of several research studies. Antonioni (1994) found that managers viewed the feedback process more positively when raters were held accountable for their ratings, yet subordinates viewed the feedback process more positively when they were anonymous. When raters were held accountable (i.e., identified), they gave higher ratings because they were concerned about the repercussions of giving low ratings.

Vinson (1996) and London et al. (1990) emphasized the importance of ensuring anonymous and confidential feedback. McEvoy and Buller (1987) found that confidentiality of the rating process is a factor in user acceptance of the rating system. Thus, it appears that anonymity of raters carries the formidable advantage of increasing the likelihood that accurate ratings are provided, also increasing the likelihood of the self-rater gap that is important to improvements in managerial behavior (Johnson & Ferstl, 1999). Perhaps the managerial reaction to this anonymity could be improved by providing raters the option of divulging their identity and encouraging the use of detailed narrative comments to justify the ratings provided. It should be recognized, however, that most of the studies recommending anonymity of raters were discussing 360-degree feedback for developmental purposes. For administrative purposes, the anonymity of raters could be more problematic.

17. How Many Raters Should Be Used?

It appears that three raters is the absolute minimum to have before feedback is given to managers (Johnson & Ferstl, 1999; Smither et al., 1995; Yukl & Lepsinger, 1995). Others have recommended slightly higher numbers (four or five; Bernardin & Beatty, 1987; London, Wohlers, & Gallagher, 1990). Finally, although he did not provide any specific numbers, Bracken (1994) recommended specifying both a maximum and minimum number of raters to use.

18. Should Managers Make Self-Ratings?

Most research has had managers make self-ratings. This is due to the fact that self-assessment, especially when done for developmental reasons, sets the stage for receiving constructive feedback from others. This can highlight discrepancies, and it creates a tension that can motivate managers to examine areas that might need improvement (Antonioni, 1996). It also can facilitate behavior change because it allows a comparison to how others see you and may force managers to reconsider their self-concept. In other words, discrepancies demand resolution (London & Beatty, 1993). Finally, it prevents hindsight bias (i.e., dismissing feedback because “I know that”).

19. Should Narrative Comments Be Collected?

One of the issues in providing feedback to managers centers on narrative comments. As Antonioni (1996) has emphasized, managers have a strong desire for feedback in the form of written comments because it helps them interpret the numerical ratings and provides suggestions for improvements. This suggests that raters be asked to provide written comments to explain or justify their ratings. But providing such comments has some drawbacks as well, such as potentially violating the anonymity of the raters, being more time consuming to complete, taking more administrative resources to process, and potentially soliciting overly critical comments.

20. How Do You Know You Are Ready to Implement the Program?

Both Bernardin and Beatty (1987) and Waldman et al. (1998) suggested engaging in pilot tests prior to implementing a 360-degree feedback program. Specifically, they recommended conducting a field test on a sample of employees, conducting statistical item analysis to revise or discard items, and interviewing participants about procedures and reactions to the program. These steps help ensure that the groundwork is in place before full implementation begins.

21. What Kind of Administrative Control Should You Ensure?

There are also certain administrative controls that are important to successfully administering a 360-degree feedback program. Bernardin and Beatty (1987) discussed these controls and recommended developing a detailed plan for survey distribution and data collection, providing clear directions as to the purpose of the program and use of the data, collecting data directly from the rater (instead of having the manager collect the data), setting up some sort of “hotline” that will be available to clarify any questions about procedures, getting a cover letter of endorsement from a high-ranking official outside of HR, ensuring adequate company time to complete surveys, and destroying handwritten comments after they have been transcribed.

London et al. (1990) also identified a range of different individuals who might administer the process. This includes such people as the manager, local HR representative, central corporate staff member, or outside consultant. Walker and Smither (1999) conducted a group survey administration facilitated by the HR department. An HR representative visited off-site locations. They received 100% participation of managers and over 90% response rate for subordinates.

22. How Should You Collect the Data?

The two most popular methods of data collection are paper-and-pencil surveys and computer-based surveys. Computer-based surveys have the advantage of rapid data feedback, but technical problems may occur. Paper-and-pencil surveys take longer to collect, but they are familiar to most organizational members and are usually less expensive to develop.

Interpreting the 360-Degree Feedback Data

23. What Should Be Done With the Ratings?

Once the data have been collected, the question remains as to how it should be used. A variety of different recommendations have been made with respect to what should be done with completed 360-degree feedback data. For example, Bernardin and Beatty (1987) recommended interpreting the data cautiously at first, interpreting subordinate data only in conjunction with other information (outcome/results data, other rating sources, and so forth), and having fast turnaround.

Similarly, Atwater and Waldman (1998) suggested ensuring accountability for developmental uses, sharing developmental areas or action plans suggested by the feedback with constituents, and not focusing on specific ratings or comments. Antonioni (1996) recommended having review sessions with a qualified specialist (e.g., HR specialist, outside consultant, and so forth) to understand the data and to focus on areas that need improvement, focusing on no more than two or three areas for improvement, meeting with raters and sharing areas targeted for improvement (to seek additional information and to set specific rather than general improvement goals), setting specific action plans and specific improvement goals, sharing summary results back to the raters, making sure to avoid "dead-end" feedback (feedback that results in no discernable change) because dead-end feedback quickly breeds cynicism and taints the whole 360-degree process, and making managers accountable for performance improvements. In order to accomplish this last point, the authors suggested four strategies, namely: (a) Require managers to share and discuss results with raters and commit to address areas that need improvement, (b) require managers to share the 360-degree feedback results with their immediate supervisor (but this approach needs significant structuring to be effective), (c) use 360-degree feedback results in the annual performance review, and (d) link the absence of improvement to some type of negative consequence (e.g., demotion, lack of promotion).

In addition, Yukl and Lepsinger (1995) suggested involving managers in interpreting the feedback, emphasizing strengths as well as weaknesses, asking each manager to develop an improvement plan, providing opportunities for skill training to help managers learn how to improve behavior, and providing support and coaching that helps managers apply what has been learned.

Finally, London et al. (1990) suggested providing a set of recommended actions for each category of items; handling extremely negative results on a personal, case-by-case basis; and giving feedback via mail, in a seminar, or one on one.

24. What Kind of Feedback Should You Give to Managers?

Different authors recommend different kinds of feedback. Several different combinations of feedback data have been recommended. For example, Yukl and Lepsinger (1995) recommended clearly identifying feedback from different perspectives, comparing feedback from others with the managers' own perceptions, comparing manager ratings to norms, displaying feedback for items as well as scales, and providing feedback in terms of recommendations (particularly if raters have indicated what the manager should do).

London et al. (1990) suggested providing normative data to indicate how well the organization as a whole is doing as well as to highlight individual training needs. Such data could include self-ratings, peer ratings, organizational norms, and number of raters. They also suggested reporting average ratings, grouping items into categories, looking for large discrepancies (e.g., where self-rating is higher than average of subordinate ratings), and looking at differences between norms and self-ratings.

London and Beatty (1993) offered a handful of different options, including a narrative summary, a statistical summary, the means and variation with item-by-item listing, and norms for department/organization. They did note, however, that the more detailed the report, the more interpretation required. This increases the likelihood that the manager's biases will affect the interpretation.

Smither et al. (1995) provided managers with a feedback booklet approximately 13 pages long. It contained the following: (a) interpretive guidelines, (b) a comparison for each performance category of the mean self-rating and the mean rating from subordinates, (c) a comparison for each item of the self-rating versus the average and range of ratings from subordinates, (d) a summary of strengths and developmental areas, (e) developmental suggestions, (f) the manager's average rating for each performance category from subordinates compared with peer norms, (g) an aggregate organizational report for higher level managers that presented the average ratings given to all the managers in the organization, (h) guidelines for sharing results with direct reports and supervisors, and (i) verbatim transcriptions of any comments from subordinates in response to open-ended questions.

25. What Should You Do If Different Raters Do Not Agree in Their Ratings?

It is quite common for different raters to provide very different ratings about a given manager. In addition, self-ratings typically only modestly converge with peer and supervisor ratings (although peer and supervisor ratings converge better; Harris & Schaubroeck, 1988).

In a large-scale study of sources, Mount et al. (1998) found that each rater's ratings (self-ratings, two bosses, two peers, two subordinates) were different enough from each other to constitute a separate method. The implication for 360-degree feedback reports is that the information should be displayed separately for each individual rater. This would allow the ratee to examine patterns of each rater's ratings across the skills. However, anonymity would be an obvious concern with this recommendation.

For their part, Atwater, Ostroff, Yammarino, and Fleenor (1998) found that when self- and other-ratings are in agreement and high, effectiveness is high. Effectiveness decreases as self- and other-ratings agree and become lower. In addition, effectiveness tends to be lower when self-ratings are greater than other ratings.

Notwithstanding this evidence, Tornow (1993a) suggested that for practical applications, differences in ratings are not error variance but meaningful differences in perspective that may enhance personal learning. This suggests that rating differences can be used to develop managers. But when used for administrative purposes, it is important to investigate the causes of rater differences.

26. How Should Narrative Comments Be Communicated to Managers?

Narrative comments help managers interpret the meaning of quantitative ratings, but they also pose a greater risk for offending managers if they are highly critical. They can also violate anonymity through inadvertent self-identification. Because of these problems, when written comments have been collected, the following procedures can be followed to reduce the risks: Transcribe the comments and remove names or events that may identify the rater, provide a general summary of the comments if several raters provide the same comments to remove identifying features, ask raters to provide specific recommendations as to what the manager should be doing (if given a low rating), and link comments to specific performance dimensions (Antonioni, 1996).

27. How Often Should 360 Data Be Collected?

Antonioni (1996) suggested it could occur more than once a year and cited some organizations as collecting 360-degree feedback data every 6 months. Most authors suggested that data should be collected at least once a year (London & Beatty, 1993), but others noted that 360-degree data should not be collected during normal performance appraisal times (London et al., 1990). This is particularly important if 360-degree feedback is being used for developmental purposes, because having normal performance appraisals and 360-degree feedback occur close in time may negatively affect the developmental value of the feedback (i.e., managers may not want to focus on weaknesses).

Conclusions

While 360-degree feedback systems have proven to be popular and useful, there has been a shortage of literature attempting to translate our academic understanding of the topic into practical advice. The current article has reviewed the research on 360-degree feedback programs to provide recommendations for practitioners who are charged with designing, developing, implementing, administering, and interpreting such multisource feedback programs. It is hoped that this translation of the research will allow users of these programs to more fully benefit from the research-based knowledge that we now have. This review should not only be useful to practitioners, however. It should also be a valuable tool to researchers interested in pursuing research agendas that address practical questions faced when implementing these programs.

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