

WHAT IS MULTI-SOURCE (360) FEEDBACK AND WHAT ARE ITS BEST USES?

Multi-source feedback is an efficient, computer-based mechanism for gathering structured, highly objective measurements about areas of individual and group competence from a variety of sources, such as bosses, customers, peers, coworkers and direct reports.

The process focuses on observable behaviors that have been validated by research to be relevant to the workplace. Because it combines scaled ratings from many sources, the data are as fine-tuned, comprehensive, detailed and accurate as measurements of human performance can be. Most 360 systems have extensive safeguards for anonymity and confidentiality. These features assure participants that 360 is a safe way to share information that is otherwise hard to measure and awkward to communicate.

While 360 is an extremely effective diagnostic tool, you can't expect it alone to solve your organization's performance improvement problems. It is, however, the best possible input to what should follow afterward: leadership and developmental programs.

The best uses of 360 involve giving people valid information about their performance so they can focus their efforts on priority areas for development. Multi-source feedback is most commonly used four ways.

1. Measuring hard-to-quantify aspects of performance. Many aspects of work, especially business, technical and administrative activities, are relatively easy to quantify and measure, so it doesn't make sense to go to the trouble of surveying a lot of opinions about them. Other key areas of performance are hard to quantify. Typically, these involve important areas of interpersonal skill, such as leadership, team communication, sales, service, negotiation and instruction. If the tool is flexible enough to administer customized assessments, it can be used in the following applications:

- Leadership development
- Team development
- Employee development

2. Needs assessment. Most 360 systems will aggregate individual data at group and organization levels, providing the best performance-based data for needs assessment possible. Organizations can easily see where skills strengths and deficiencies are.

3. Organizational surveys. If the 360 system software can be easily customized, any kind of multi-source feedback survey can be administered. Feedback for a group, department or other organizational entity can be gathered and analyzed.

- Climate surveys
- Customer satisfaction surveys
- Team effectiveness surveys

4. Performance review. 360 is best used for measuring aspects of performance that are otherwise hard to measure. While its primary usefulness is in gathering data about competence for developmental feedback, it can also be used to gather data about hard-to-quantify results for performance feedback. For example, results such as project completion, safety records and sales totals are easy to quantify, and they make excellent goals and accountability measures. A 360 assessment would not be needed for such areas. However, important results such as increased team ethics, cooperativeness and

customer satisfaction are much harder to quantify. Surveys can help a manager include these "soft" results along with "hard" bottom-line results in the performance review.