

Introduction

Debbie Hance offers her views on how to get the most out of a competence framework in the context of 360 feedback.

The best 360 degree feedback tools provide the recipient and the organisation with rich, focused and useful feedback about an individual's performance. Off-the-shelf products will get you so far, but in order to get the greatest return from your investment, it is worth putting some time and effort into researching what really makes a difference in your organisation.

Developments in technology and the increased use of web-based tools means that we can now include a number of features in 360 degree feedback which enhance the utility of the feedback for recipients and which help the person facilitating the feedback (whether that is an external consultant, line manager or internal development/HR professional) to make the best use of the time they spend discussing the feedback with recipients.

The three features we discuss here are Keys, Eyes and Reverse Items.

Keys

Through our work developing competency models, as well as designing and using 360 degree feedback processes within organisations, we have found that there is usually a small number of competencies that are generally seen to be 'critical' or that have been found to be particularly predictive of success at senior levels. These may be competencies that are particularly hard to develop in people, or they may be competencies that are specifically linked to the business strategy or a change process. By carrying out research within the organisation, you can identify these competencies and highlight them in the 360 degree feedback report. Having 'keyed' competencies can remove the 'it doesn't apply to me' excuse when discussing the feedback - research has shown that these competencies are critical for success, so therefore the individual should think carefully about their performance in this area. Keys provide a useful focus for the feedback discussion and highlight priorities for training and development plans.

Keys can also be provided by role - focussing on the competencies that are particularly linked to success within a particular role can dramatically enhance utility and ensure that the process has a direct impact on the individual's performance.

Eyes

Again, through application of 360 degree feedback in a number of organisations and for a number of purposes, we have found length of questionnaires to be an important consideration. Too long, and people will be discouraged from completing them. Also, the cost in terms of employee time taken to fill in questionnaires becomes high. Too short, and you lose some of the richness and are less able to cover enough competencies in the depth you require. A solution to this is to tailor the questionnaire to the role and also to the respondent.

When designing the questionnaires, think about who is best placed to comment on the different competencies. Direct reports will probably provide accurate and useful feedback on competencies related to people management (e.g., managing performance, motivating and inspiring others) but how much strategic thinking are they likely to observe their manager engaging in? Senior peers are often well-placed to comment on things like influencing skills

and teamwork but would they know how effective an individual was at developing their staff or dealing with clients? Of course, each organisation is different, and holding a series of focus groups with key stakeholders and respondents can provide answers to these questions. You can then send out a slightly different version of the questionnaire to the different groups, which reduces the amount of time taken to complete each questionnaire and minimises the number of 'don't know' or 'not observed' ratings which can water-down the feedback.

'Eyes' can be used to take this process further.

Let's take one of the above examples again - influencing skills. The focus group research might suggest that all respondent groups (e.g., direct reports, manager, peers, client/customers) are able to observe this competency for a given role. However, a great deal of the work within this role is carried out on a project basis, with individuals having to negotiate for resources from peers in other teams and having to exert influence in situations where they have no formal authority. You could include the influencing competency in all questionnaires, but highlight the peers' feedback with an 'eye' symbol, to indicate that it is this group whose ratings and comments should be of most interest to the recipient.

This adds a useful dimension to the feedback discussion, enabling the facilitator to explore the value of the ratings from the different groups and to focus development actions on the views of those whose opinions really count.

Reverse Items

Another useful feature which is not often incorporated in traditional 360 feedback tools is the inclusion of 'reverse items' or contra-indicators. These are questions or items that are (sometimes subtly) negatively-worded, asking respondents to think carefully about the recipient's style and usual ways of behaving. Reverse items are useful because they can help to elicit more constructive feedback, keeping the respondent on their toes and getting them to consider the less effective aspects of behaviour. Of course, you have to ensure your briefing includes a caution to respondents: those simply completing the questionnaire as quickly as possible or those who indiscriminately provide middle or high scores may miss the subtle difference in the questions and provide inaccurate answers. Respondents need to be carefully selected and briefed and using a 'nominated manager' to review the feedback for anomalous ratings should counter these problems.

What is the value of reverse items?

Let's take the example of a diversity-related competency - we'll call it 'Understanding and Respecting Diversity'. How would you know if someone possessed this competency? Would you look for those who treated all people the same, regardless of background, ethnicity, beliefs etc? Not necessarily. How would you know this person was driven by values of inclusion and a respect for diversity? They may simply be unaware of cultural differences and behaving in a way that is consistent with their own values and beliefs, rather than taking into account the needs of others. In some organisations, the item 'treats everybody the same' could be used to indicate a lack of this competency, where genuinely high-performing individuals have a keen awareness and understanding of individual differences and are able to adapt their approach accordingly, to achieve the best results.

Some competencies are more easily observed when the person does not possess them. Take the example of Self Control - a personal effectiveness competency which can be important in roles where individuals have to deal with stressful or hostile conditions. There are positive indicators associated with this competency (e.g., “Responds calmly under pressure” and “Manages stress effectively”) but this is an example of a competency which is much easier to spot when it is absent! Reverse items can help to draw out behaviours which are indicative of a development need in a particular area.

By developing a bespoke competency framework, positioning the process correctly, including features such as these and shaping your 360 feedback tool to the specific needs of your organisation, you will avoid many of the pitfalls associated with 360 degree feedback and ensure the process is a useful and valuable one for those involved in it.

If you would like to know more, our core team and associates have deep expertise in the definition, design and fulfilment of 360° assessment programmes, **competence frameworks**, in addition to other assessment strategies such as **situational judgement** and psychometric tests.

Head Light Communications also has the proven ability to conduct objective marketplace searches and evaluations of enabling HR technology, having assisted organisations select HR Management Systems, Performance Appraisal tools, e-learning courseware and bespoke tools and software.

We also have our own portfolio of on-line assessment software in this area, namely **Talent 360™**, **Talent 180™ 3.0** and **Talent Spotter™**.