

360 degree feedback
in developing
leadership skills
management essay



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There is a great deal of controversy about the relevancy of using 360-degree feedback as a tool to develop leadership skills. Some view 360-degree feedback as a collaborative tool, a tool offering a more balanced circle of feedback based on the assessments of superiors, peers, and subordinates. These views lead me to wonder, how effective can this tool be if it does not factor in “ leadership styles” and the potential for bias based on “ popularity?” Will personality and popularity play a role in the assessment? Though extreme, there is some merit to my position. This realization guided me to my decision that 360-degree feedback is an effective tool to provide self assessment and can also be used to enhance performance measures during annual counseling such as leadership, communication, and mission effectiveness.

Background

The underlying theory of 360-degree feedback asserts that an assessment received from multiple sources provides unique and meaningful information to the recipient. Rapid growth of its use was fueled by the need to adapt to a changing human resources management environment and by numerous studies that supported the effectiveness of multi-source ratings in post-feedback management development.

A significant complaint of the traditional performance appraisal system voiced by services is that feedback is generally one-sided and can lack objectivity. In the 1940s, the Army implemented a tool called the multi-rater system, also known as the multisource assessment process.[1]The multi-rater system allows a person’s evaluation to encompass reviews from not only a rater, but also a person’s subordinates, peers, clients, and

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organizational hierarchy. This allows a reviewer to get a more complete picture of a person and removes a singular rater from being able to determine the fate of a career. If an officer's boss dislikes a subordinate, but he gets top marks from everyone else, it puts the boss's review in context, and would likely generate questions from the senior rater over the rating ability of the boss.

In 2006, the Navy tested a prototype model of the 360-degree feedback process in the Surface Warfare Community. Similar to Army results, the Navy prototype showcased a strength of the 360-degree feedback process is its ability to provide varying perspectives of raters. The Navy prototype findings also emphasized that a supervisor cannot observe all the interactions, strengths and opportunities for improvement of his subordinates for evaluation reports, especially if the span of control is broad.[2] So why should the supervisor be the only person to provide performance feedback?

Discussion

A major advantage to the 360-degree feedback process is that it provides an opportunity for people with whom a person comes into frequent contact to offer feedback. This is an important consideration because the rater should be the person that has observed the employee on a frequent basis. It would be unfair and impractical to ask a rater for input when the opportunity to observe an employee's skills, talents and abilities have not been provided on a regular basis.

Let's look at two examples of 360-degree feedback in action; first let's look at an Army Captain who serves as a signal officer in an infantry battalion. His

rater is the Battalion Executive Officer, a combat-arms officer, who does not know much about communication other than how to operate a radio. If the signal officer performs his job well, the XO will likely give him a reasonably favorable review on a traditional Evaluation Review. Now let's use a 360-degree feedback process and involve his higher-echelon counterpart, the Brigade S6 Officer, who is a Major and a signal officer, who gives the Captain an excellent rating based on his technical proficiency. If we involve his section, they can comment on his leadership, management style and his ability to explain complex technical issues in plain English. His peers in the battalion, other captains and the company commanders, all give him high marks for working with them to resolve communication issues. Now the 360-degree feedback process is given to his senior rater, the Battalion Commander, who now has a more complete view of this officer and how he has performed based on additional feedback from numerous sources, rather than the traditional counseling from one rater that would have communicated a generic, but reasonably positive review.

Another example of how this method is beneficial is to look at an Army infantry platoon leader, a 1st Lieutenant, who routinely sucks up to his company commander, volunteers his platoon for the toughest assignments, scores expert in marksmanship and fitness and has impressed the battalion commander in a field operation. This 1st Lieutenant would normally excel in the traditional counseling process, because his rater and senior rater have the impression that he is above and beyond the standard. Using the 360-degree process, let's say his platoon sergeant reports the 1st Lieutenant delegates much of his work to him and leaves work as early as possible.

Some of his squad leaders complain that they always get stuck with volunteer duty while the 1st Lieutenant is off somewhere sleeping. His fellow 1st Lieutenants do not like the guy and view him as a show-off. When this review hits the senior rater's desk it will give him a very different view and provide more insight than the traditional counseling report would provide.

The above example showcases that when feedback comes from many sources, it's more difficult for a person to brush aside constructive criticism and rationalize that "the boss just has it in for me." If several people suggest that a leader needs to improve verbal communication skills, chances are high that this is indeed a necessary area for improvement. Another advantage of the 360-degree feedback process is that it is designed with a leadership focus in mind. Sometimes it's difficult for individuals to understand the impact that their behavior may have on others. However, if they receive direct and frequent feedback on how their behaviors affect others they are more likely to be attentive.

Studies show that the 360-degree feedback process is particularly strong when joined with an action plan developed by the person receiving feedback and shared with those providing the feedback. The action plan demonstrates the feedback was heard and the suggestions will be put to use as soon as possible. Studies also strongly suggest that each person receiving feedback, especially for the first time, should have a coach to help assess the comments and help to develop the action plan.[3]I recommend the 360-degree feedback process be coupled with competency-based job descriptions; this aids in placing an individual in a position based on the

competencies of the position and it ensures the individual is evaluated on those same competencies.

Now looking at 360-degree feedback from the perspective of what we learned in seminar about leadership styles. The trait theory assumes people are born with inherited traits and that some traits are particularly associated with great leaders. For instance, there is a scene in the highly-acclaimed and offbeat 1949 World War II film, *12 O'Clock High*, in which Army Air Corps Colonel Keith Davenport, played by Gary Merrill, is the commander who becomes too close to his flyers and eventually cracks under the strain of seeing one of them commit suicide. Colonel Davenport portrayed significant traits to be successful as noted in the trait theory (willing to assume responsibility and alert to social environment). If he was assessed using the 360-degree feedback model, he would have received rave reviews from his supervisor, peers and subordinates based on his leadership style, but if evaluated on technical proficiency he would receive low marks due to the squadrons inability to perform precision daylight bombing.

Major General Frank Savage replaced Colonel Davenport and pounded discipline and accountability into the squadron, and managed to get them back in the air with a new level of success. If General Savage was given the 360-degree feedback assessment, his rating would have surely required him to make an adjustment in his tough leadership style. This was evident by the number of transfer requests received from the pilots and the short fused IG inspection to assess squadron morale. General Savage's tough leadership style ultimately proved to be successful with a significant increase in putting bombs on target as required for mission success. General Savage also <https://assignbuster.com/360-degree-feedback-in-developing-leadership-skills-management-essay/>

projected many of the traits that are considered necessary to be a successful leader such as decisive, dependable, assertive, dominant and persistent.

360-degree feedback is not a substitute for managing poor performance. Instead it is a tool that can be implemented to help employees gain a rich, accurate perspective on how others view their leadership skills, interpersonal style and mission effectiveness. 360-degree feedback should not replace leadership's assessment and evaluation of performance. This is an important point because leaders may be tempted to use 360-degree feedback as a tool to facilitate behavior changes in poor performers. Rather than manage an employee's day-to-day performance, leaders may view the multi-rater feedback process as a panacea. Although feedback from a 360-degree process can stimulate self-awareness, it cannot replace direct communication between an employee and his or her superior. An organization should exercise great care in implementing a 360-degree feedback system because unfamiliarity with a person, differences in job and task characteristics, differences in rank, and cognitive differences between an employee and rater can distort assessments. Leaders should also be mindful not to view the 360-degree feedback process "as a special event", using it once as part of a training or coaching session. If leaders make this mistake, the goal of ensuring that feedback is incorporated into continuous improvement plans will not be accomplished.

Counter Argument

To counter my thesis, I must mention that there are potential pitfalls that deal with trust and confidentiality. The key to overcoming pitfalls are to inform everyone of the plan and to stick to it. Additionally, privacy to <https://assignbuster.com/360-degree-feedback-in-developing-leadership-skills-management-essay/>

recipients, and confidentiality to raters regarding the feedback they provide, is an absolute must. As previously described, the tricky part is that we are nearing the line of subordinates possessing the capability to directly influence a leader's career. While 360-degree feedback is not a panacea, impact from any of the above risks would likely be minimal at best with today's motivated, quality all-volunteer force. Nevertheless, it would make sense to establish safeguards wherever possible. Looking at the big picture, the benefits of 360-degree feedback far exceed the pitfalls that can be remedied with careful implementation and changes in organizational culture.

Despite the benefits of 360-degree feedback, there are several potential risks which weaken its validity and effectiveness. The most common risk is wrongfully assuming that using feedback from multiple sources will compensate for intentional or unintentional distortion (i. e. lying). The truth is that feedback collected incorrectly increases rather than decreases the occurrence of error; thus, destroying the credibility of the results.

Conclusion

I believe that 360-degree feedback should be incorporated into performance measures more specifically leadership, communication and mission effectiveness. The 360-degree feedback program is an excellent performance feedback tool and should be designed for counseling purposes only. There are a couple of ways to regulate the use of this information. The first way is to introduce this technique as a leader developmental tool.

Initially, the services could use the train-the-trainer model at the deck plate level, while incorporating it into its school systems. This method will train all

leaders and supervisors in the proper use. Given that all leaders have <https://assignbuster.com/360-degree-feedback-in-developing-leadership-skills-management-essay/>

supervisors, I do not envision significant difficulties. I strongly believe our current leader development system can provide leaders for the future force; however, I strongly believe we can improve the system to make leaders more self-aware and thereby more effective. By implementing the 360-degree feedback method into our system, we will grow leaders who will win the many literal and figurative wars this nation faces in the future.