



Checklist: Organizational Readiness for 360° Assessment

A handout in support of the presentation

“360 Degree Assessments: Are They Right for Your Organization?”

2003 ASTD/SHRM Spring Conference
Roanoke, VA
April 25, 2003

Larry Brower, President
Saratoga Resource Group

Following are some the major considerations in determining whether 360° assessment is appropriate for your organization or not.

1. Why do some people resist the idea of 360 feedback?

Multi-source (360) feedback gives precise, credible information about important aspects of individual performance that are otherwise hard to measure. The feedback can enhance a person's effectiveness in the workplace and promote teamwork.

So why do some people resist it initially? The short answer is that they're not sure that 360 is in their best interests. It's important to overcome this resistance, because the assessment process depends on willing participation. Knowing the most common reasons for resistance can help you avoid problems.

Bad associations with performance appraisal. Most people have not had positive experiences with performance appraisal, and they may think that 360 will be used as an appraisal tool. They may be afraid that negative feedback will affect their pay or job. The best strategy is to use 360 primarily for development and avoid linking it to appraisal, compensation or personnel decisions.

Concerned that ratings and comments will not be anonymous. People are wary of telling the truth if they think that doing so will cause censure or retribution. They worry that executives are "rating the raters." Ensure that systems and policies guarantee anonymity, and let everyone know how they work.

Concerned the process will not be confidential. If people think that higher-level managers will scrutinize specific ratings and comments, they will conclude that realistic ratings could have negative consequences. This makes it hard for them to be objective. Establish and enforce effective confidentiality mechanisms. Show managers only the minimum information they need to coach direct reports.

Don't like taking the time. Most employees are already under a lot of stress. They resent having to do things that will interfere with their success. For best results, abbreviate surveys, so that you address only the essential issues. Ask for feedback only from people who are familiar with the rated individual's performance. Plan follow-up developmental activities; people resent exercises that come to no result.

Afraid of feedback. Nobody is perfect, and it's often unsettling to discover the truth. Constructive feedback is never easy to accept. It implies extra effort to address performance issues. During the first cycles of feedback, conduct sessions to reinforce feedback skills and to help people accept feedback.

Don't take HR programs seriously. Employees may have a "here it comes again" attitude. HR fads come and go, but employees don't always see the promised results. They may suspect that 360 is another "feel-good" exercise that will ultimately benefit neither them nor the bottom line. It's best not to promote 360 as an HR program. Introduce it as a new resource for employees that has its place in an already well-established system of professional development. Explain how it works. Position it as a tool for people who want to improve the quality of work life and increase their value in the career marketplace.

2. What can make implementation of 360 difficult?

In a sense, every organization is ready for multi-source (360) feedback. The feedback is valuable, people need it, the approach works, and any organization can afford the technology. Nevertheless, there is more to introducing 360 than buying and using a software package. It's a tool used to evaluate and improve performance, so it will be used in context with the existing performance management system.

Certain conditions can delay an organization's acceptance of 360. However, if identified early, these issues can be addressed with information and preparation.

A recent reorganization. In order for ratings and comments to be valid, feedback providers must be familiar with the performance patterns of the people receiving feedback. People new to the team will need time to get to know each other.

People unfamiliar with 360. 360 is a relatively new approach to performance feedback. Because of past experience with ineffective performance appraisal systems, people may be wary of new approaches, and they may not understand the benefits of 360. This can cause resistance. The answer is usually information.

A climate of mistrust. For many reasons, an organizational climate may not foster trusting workplace relationships. When competitiveness and conflicts have caused animosity and distrust, people may find it hard to believe that feedback is objective and well-intended. They may not trust that the data will be used to benefit them.

Inexperience with receiving feedback. 360 is a technology for facilitating feedback from many sources. If people are not used to receiving formal performance reviews or in-person feedback from supervisors, they may find the idea of 360 foreign and unwelcome.

Few computers in the workplace. The most affordable, flexible and user-friendly types of 360 involve computers. A workplace that has few or no computers must rely on a system that uses paper forms.

Minimal investment in human resource development. The primary purpose of 360 is to give people the feedback they need to grow in the job. If an organization has not invested in HRD in the past, it may lack the understanding to use 360 effectively.

Little money for human resource development. Although some state-of-the-art 360 systems are affordable, the technology is not free. Funds must be available for purchase of software and usage licenses.

No one to act as coordinator. The 360 process may include preparation, administration and development. If no HRD personnel or training staff are available, the management of these activities can be outsourced.

3. How important is trust to using 360 successfully?

The people who give and receive feedback must trust that the information will be used to benefit all participants. If managers say that ratings will be anonymous, that feedback will remain confidential, and that the data will be used strictly for individual development planning, will people believe them?

Trust is hard-earned. People learn to trust their managers not so much by listening to what they say but by remembering what they do. While it can take months or years to earn trust, it can be lost in a single moment if managers do not deliver on their promises. Therefore, when executives talk about the usefulness and confidentiality of multi-source feedback, people may be reluctant to believe there is no downside. To protect themselves, they may imagine worst-case scenarios and resist a process that would otherwise benefit them.

Where trust is lacking, a 360 program usually fails. If performance feedback has been tied to compensation or other personnel action in the past, people may find it hard to believe that ratings and comments will not be used for such decisions in the future. Believing that jobs or careers are at stake, they will find it extremely difficult to give honest ratings. They may try to protect the job security of their friends or derail people with whom they don't get along. It's unrealistic to expect that ratings given in this climate will be consistently objective, honest and fair enough to produce valid data.

There is no shortcut to earning trust. The only thing that works is action. One way to overcome suspicions is to administer 360 with the top echelon of managers first. As people observe the process and evaluate the consequences, they will be more willing to believe reports that the program will be objective, confidential and worth the effort. It may be necessary to create several successes before widespread trust of 360 is achieved.

Typically, certain groups will see the value of the process and volunteer to be included next. With each successful round of assessment, people will spread the word about the impact and safety of the process. The important thing is to be serious about enforcing anonymity and confidentiality. There is no way to avoid the consequences of a broken promise.

Will there be trust issues in your organization?

- Do people believe what their managers say?
- Do people believe that managers have their best interests in mind?
- Is formal performance feedback currently linked to pay and promotion?

Every organization is different, and every organization's needs are unique. Please feel free to contact Larry Brower at (434) 975-0567 for a complimentary conversation about whether or not your particular organization is ready for 360.



Biographical Summary LARRY BROWER



Larry is the President of the Saratoga Resource Group. He and his colleagues focus on designing and implementing successful and effective management, leadership, and organizational development initiatives in support of company objectives. They are especially skilled in helping to facilitate and manage, through these initiatives, the organizational change associated with mergers, acquisitions, industry de-regulation, re-engineering, and re-organization efforts.

Larry's expertise in developing managers and executives is based on 25 years of experience in management, leadership, and organizational development, training, and Human Resources management. This experience has been acquired in companies ranging from an entrepreneurial start-up to two Fortune 500 companies. These companies have been in a diverse group of industries including banking and financial services, insurance, electronics manufacturing, municipal government, and consulting.

He has special expertise in the construction and implementation of new, comprehensive learning architectures. Larry most recently established, marketed, and managed nationally the Management and Leadership Development function for KeyCorp, a \$65B (assets) banking and financial services holding company. He was also Corporate Training Manager with nation-wide responsibilities for Orion Capital Companies, an \$800M (sales) insurance and financial services firm.

Being deeply experienced in the use of assessment tools, Larry represents two publishers of world-class assessment instruments, Training House/HRD Press, of Amherst, MA, publisher of MAP/EXCEL/Perspectives, and Performance Support Systems of Newport News, VA, publisher of 20/20 Insight Gold. He is also certified in such world-class tools as the Organizational Culture Inventory, the Myers-Briggs Indicator, and DISC.

Concurrently, Larry is an adjunct faculty member at the Center for Executive Development at the University of Virginia. He has also taught in the FORUM/East Management Program at Empire State College, State University of New York, Saratoga Springs, NY; the MBA/MPA program at the College of Notre Dame, Belmont, CA; and the management/supervision program at Mission College, Santa Clara, CA. He has also been a visiting lecturer at the Oregon College of Education, Monmouth, OR; Gavilan College, Morgan Hill, CA; and the California State Fire Academy, Asilomar, CA.

Larry's educational background includes a Bachelor of Arts, Political Science, San Francisco State University, and a Master of Public Administration (emphasis in human resource management), California State University, Hayward.

His background also includes having served three years as a US Army officer, Military Intelligence Branch, including a year in Vietnam. He is a native of Staunton, VA.