



Making Asia a Great Place to Work

Feedback for Development

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360° feedback is fundamentally a means of finding out how the boss, peers, direct reports and others view a leader. As such the process can be wide open to misunderstanding and fear. It is a means to an end - but what end? Who will see the information? How will it be used? Nancy Hughes Verhoeven takes a practical look at 360° feedback in leader and top team development in Asia from the leader's perspective.

From the outset it is vital to explain that feedback for development purposes is not feedback for assessment. Many companies in Asia are employing feedback tools, usually as an internal HR-organized process, to gather information on a manager in order to assess his performance. This information could affect his bonus and maybe even his promotion prospects. Understandably many managers are wary of such a process.

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Feedback for development purposes is, however, a totally different concept. It is an external process, confidential to the individual participant and aims to help him understand his strengths and weaknesses and provide a practical guide to improving his leadership practices and behaviors.

If the end differs then so must the process. It is important to make the time to explain to all involved, participants and respondents, exactly how the process will work and what their role is. This usually takes the form of a pre-workshop briefing for participants, in one or two groups depending on the numbers involved.

Respondents, because of their larger numbers, are often briefed by email or letter although I have arranged group briefings for 120-150 people (responding to 30 participants). It is extremely helpful if participants themselves contact their nominated respondents to notify them that they have been selected and ask for honest and constructive feedback.



In the process, there are four key points to address:

- Methodology - how feedback will be obtained
- Expectations - what type of feedback will be sought
- Learning - how feedback will be interpreted
- Development - how feedback can be used

Methodology

Multi-source (360°) feedback requires each participant to choose around five peer managers and five direct reports, in addition to the boss, to complete a feedback questionnaire. Organizations may also choose to extend the range of respondents to former colleagues, other departments and customers. These questionnaires are completed and submitted to the third-party organizers through a web-based system or by email.

Managers in MNCs have often been exposed to the concept of 360° development feedback, even if they have not personally experienced it, and seem generally less concerned than their counterparts in Asian organizations and government bodies. The latter are often receiving 360° feedback for the first time and have lots of questions about confidentiality - even calling after the briefing to double check who will see the forms.

I find that participating leaders at my feedback briefings are most anxious about who will have access to the information gathered. "Who will see the completed questionnaires?" "Will copies of the reports be given to HR?" "How can I be sure that confidentiality will be respected?"

Respondents also have questions about confidentiality, but from their own perspective. "If the participant receives anonymous feedback from 3-5 people, won't he/she be able to identify who said what?" "If I'm honest and give some constructive feedback, will I somehow receive some backlash?" "Wouldn't it be more confidential if the respondents were chosen anonymously instead of by the participant?"

The reassurance to all these questions lies in the

process. Only the individual filling it in, the feedback facilitator and the participant see each completed questionnaire. Only the participant receives a copy of the report and his development plan - although we do recommend that the latter be shared with the boss to give it a better chance of success. The use, and credibility, of an external organizer removes any risk that the information gathered could go astray.

On the question of identifying who among the respondents has said what, I have to say that it is only human nature that participants try and figure out who said what – especially if the feedback comes as a surprise. Each respondent states whether he is a boss, peer or direct report on the form and it will be clear which feedback was given by the boss (as there is usually only one!). However, with the other groups of respondents it is not so easy to figure out which people wrote what comments, especially when there are more than three respondents in a category. In any event, their guess will never be confirmed. Matching people with comments is not, however, what the exercise is about and it is the role of the coach/facilitator to focus the participant on what has been said and not who has said it.

Because the feedback process is to be used for development purposes, it is vital that the respondents know the participant well and can give productive answers. We spend a fair amount of time on discussing with the participants who they should choose. If they choose those that they think will 'mark them highly' out of friendship, they are not really helping themselves because they are not getting a true picture. Similarly respondents who are not honest in their replies are losing the opportunity to raise any problem issues which can be acted upon.

Expectations

This takes us to what information is being gathered. Although they can be customized to bring out particular aspects that are important to an organization, leadership feedback questionnaires should address leadership behaviors - they are an

opportunity for leaders to know where they stand from a perspective that they cannot see themselves. As one participant said, "It's important for the individual to understand oneself before he/she can be a contributor. This program facilitates in that search."

The questions asked are concerned with what a leader does and how often he/she is seen doing these. For example, whether he praises people for a job well done, treats people with dignity and respect, gives team members appreciation and support and develops cooperative relationships. As well as blind spots, they aim to uncover opportunities and, above all, help the leader to identify areas for development.

The idea of such feedback can be a cause of anxiety and even concern to those involved. They know that they can develop in some areas yet they would rather not think about it or they feel that they will look bad, or lose face. A major issue is how they can distinguish between honest critique, unfair criticism and flattering the boss. "How can I be sure that I will receive honest feedback?" "People will feel that they have to give positive feedback to me - how can I be sure that they will tell me the truth?" "Won't this give ample opportunity to those who want to back-stab?"

The key to all these concerns lies in choosing the respondents carefully and briefing them well. We recommend that participants approach their respondents to back up our own message that there is no point at all in doing this process unless you are going to do it honestly. Participants who rely on best friends may get all 10s but is this helpful? Remember that no one will see these 10s except the participant so he can't use them to impress his boss. If, however, they include a few people with whom they find it a challenge to work, the process may bring out the issues and lead to their resolution. We're all different people with different values and a good range of respondents will reflect this.

And yes, we can tell when respondents are being 'economical with the truth' in their answers. Honestly completed forms will usually have a range

of scores whereas unfair criticism will have consistently low scores and flatterers will mark consistently high. If we get a form with consistently low scores, we will generally advise the manager to consider whether there is a particular issue that he should deal with but otherwise focus on the majority - unless of course we get several of the same, in which case there is a major message being sent.

Learning

The completed forms are analyzed and a report prepared on each participant. The next stage is usually a peer learning workshop for the participants to discuss the issues and establish guidelines for interpretation of the reports, at the end of which they are given their reports.

The question to be answered at this stage is "How will I benefit from the feedback?" It is easy to dismiss feedback as just 'someone else's perception' but our behaviors are based on 'just our perception' of what we should do. The value of 360° feedback is that it is the sum of the perceptions of many people who work with you closely. One participant stated, "It let me know where I should improve in order to become a better leader."

If managers, and hence the organization, are to benefit from this process it is important that it does not just end with understanding how others view them. One-on-one sessions with an experienced executive development coach are recommended both to discuss the reports and draw up individual developmental plans. We do get reluctant participants who are near retirement or otherwise unwilling to buy-in to the process and it is important to emphasize the responsibility of the individual for success. Managers who are well motivated will derive the most benefit from this process.

Development

Although we always ask participants to consider their own development needs after they have had time to go through their reports, we find that they rarely do this on their own. For development planning to take place, therefore, it is essential to

arrange formal one-on-one sessions, which will result in a plan of specific actions with time frame and support identified. This plan is private to the individual but will have a better chance of implementation if shared with a supervisor (remember that the development plan is distinct from the feedback report).

"Does this multi-rater feedback really work in Asia?" I have worked with many companies in Asia and find that everyone wants to learn and improve. Development feedback is a tool to get them started.

Feedback from managers who have participated in our feedback programs shows that they have found the peer learning workshop sessions stimulating. They pick out the most interesting aspects as: "constant interaction, facilitated by tools, which helps build up trust and understanding"; "learning together

something valuable about ourselves and how to work together"; "knowing my strengths and weaknesses". Further proof is found in those organizations that have cascaded down the process to second tier management.

Feedback can provide some surprising and unexpected answers but it is the first step to seeing yourself as others see you and learning what matters to your colleagues, boss and staff. Armed with this awareness, leaders are well equipped to develop themselves and motivate others to higher performance.

About the author

Nancy Hughes Verhoeven joined Steve Morris Associates in 1999 and specializes in the areas of leadership and team development. At SMA she works with clients on long-term business coaching partnerships, including one-on-one coaching. She has over nine years' experience in marketing, project management, consulting, training and development, and worked in the USA, France and Taiwan before moving to Singapore.

About the company

International leadership consultancy Steve Morris Associates, the first dedicated leadership coaching company in Asia, coaches leaders in Asia to forge stronger teamwork at the top of the organization while fully developing employee potential. SMA designs and conducts leadership development and feedback programs that are linked to the achievement of business goals by working directly with employees at all levels.

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