

How Frequently Should 360-Degree Feedback Surveys be Administered? It All Depends...

Increasingly, organizations are realizing how valuable multi-rater surveys are for developing their leaders and for reinforcing desired leadership styles that are aligned with company strategies. They are also realizing the value of repeating surveys so managers can track their development over time. The question of how frequently these surveys should be administered often comes up. This *Insight* white paper provides guidelines to answer that question, but, as the title suggests, it really does depend...

General Guidelines

When 360 surveys are used primarily for development and aren't explicitly linked to some other HR system such as performance appraisal, then a 12-18 month cycle time is recommended. The main consideration is that managers need time between surveys to work on their development plans – to make real progress in increasing their skills in those areas they chose to focus on. A second important consideration is that more frequent administration runs the risk of over-burdening raters with too many surveys.

On the other hand, the cycle time generally should not be longer than 24 months because the assessment and development program would lose momentum, and managers benefit from more frequent feedback. This is particularly true for surveys that contain many items for which engaging in the target behaviors is more the issue than actual skill development. For example, if a manager gets low marks on an item such as "provides recognition and expresses appreciation when employees do a good job," it is probably more important that he/she simply increase the frequency of that behavior rather than becoming more skilled at it.

When 360 assessments are explicitly linked to some other HR system, then the cycle time of that system will often drive the frequency of 360 administration. For example, some companies include multi-rater surveys as part of their performance management process. The 360 results should be available *prior* to review discussions, not afterwards. Note that this doesn't necessarily mean that the 360 survey would have to be administered every year, but a 12- or 24-month cycle time would probably make more sense than an 18-month cycle time (assuming the appraisals were done annually).

The Need for Flexibility

The general rule of thumb is to administer 360 surveys about every 12-18 months, unless the cycle time of related HR systems requires something different. However, organizations may find that flexible practices concerning the frequency of 360s are more appropriate. That is, the cycle time won't always be the same for all managers. Here are some examples of situations where a different cycle time might be appropriate:

- A manager has been in a new leadership position for six months, and she and her boss would like to conduct a 360 survey to ensure things are on track, and to take early action in those areas where they are not.
- A manager has been in the same position for six years, and there has been little turnover in the staff. The recent 360 feedback report indicated several areas to work on, but nothing serious. 24 months may be appropriate for the next formal 360 survey.
- A manager's 360 survey indicated serious deficiencies in areas that are impacting his effectiveness as a leader, and those perceptions are consistent across all roles (except self). 12 months may be too long before the next survey is administered.

There may be general guidelines and practices in place regarding the frequency of 360s, but there is also flexibility to do something different when the situation warrants it. The flexibility will add some administration costs in managing the system, but the returns will be worth it.

The general rule of thumb is to administer 360 surveys about every 12-18 months, unless the cycle time of related HR systems requires something different.

Getting Feedback More Frequently

Without question, accurate feedback is extremely valuable to managers, and the more frequent the feedback, the better. Regardless of the 360 cycle time, managers shouldn't depend on formal multi-rater surveys as their only source of feedback. Managers should proactively solicit feedback on an ongoing basis.

How should managers do this? Simply by asking people. If a manager is working on an area where his/her boss is the best source, he/she should simply ask the boss, "I've been working on this. How am I doing? Am I making progress? What else can I do?" Furthermore, openly asking those kinds of questions of peers and direct reports not only provides useful feedback, it also promotes a healthy climate of good communication and trust.

The premise underlying the question of how frequently 360s should be administered is that we're talking about the same survey administered at two points in time for tracking trends. But this doesn't always have to be the case. It may be desirable in some situations to administer a sub-set of the survey items sooner than the next full survey.

Related Best Practices

Based on more than three decades of experience in conducting multi-rater surveys in all types of organizations, Censeo offers these best practices related to cycle times for consideration:

- Look for ways to involve the managers being assessed to help determine when the next 360 will be administered. The main purpose of most 360 programs is to help managers develop, and how much development actually occurs depends heavily on how much they buy in to the process. Increasing involvement in all aspects of the process, including the cycle time, will increase motivation and commitment.

- Also look for ways the bosses of the managers being assessed can have input on cycle times. They are responsible for growing the talent on their teams, and multi-rater surveys are a powerful tool to help them do just that. They should have some say about when the tool will be used.
- The two previous points notwithstanding, don't allow either managers or their bosses to opt out of the 360 process because they don't think it's worthwhile, they're too busy doing their "real jobs," or they are trying to avoid the feedback.
- Inform managers that the survey will be re-administered in the future. That awareness will in itself help spur more development action.
- Don't get trapped into administering the next 360 survey just because "it's time," when it's actually the wrong time. There may be compelling reasons not to conduct a 360 survey for a particular manager at a given point in time, or even for delaying all 360's in the company for a while (e.g., massive lay-offs just announced). Be careful, though, not to wait for the perfect time, because that may never occur.

As a final comment, while the basic question this document addresses is important, it's not nearly as important as many other 360-related questions. Probably the most salient of those questions is, "What else can we do to help managers take action on their development after they get their feedback reports?" Companies that can make progress on that question, even if they don't completely answer it, will significantly increase the impact and value of their 360 initiatives.

Censeo Corporation is a human resource consulting firm offering consulting services and Internet-based assessment products. The company's mission is to help clients maximize their investment in human capital by collecting and then strategically using accurate and valid information about competencies and work preferences. For more information, visit www.censeocorp.com, email info-request@censeocorp.com or call 407.645.1600 x150.