

Developing an Effective 360-Degree Feedback Survey and Conducting a Successful Campaign

The multi-rater survey (or 360-degree survey) process is one of the most widely used employee assessments in organizations today. It involves gathering a full circle of ratings from various perspectives (self, manager, peers, subordinates and customers) in order to diagnose skills and provide feedback to participants. While this assessment method has several advantages, they are often not fully realized due to flaws in the survey design and/or poor implementation of the survey process. This *Insight* white paper offers suggestions on how to develop a valid and effective multi-rater survey, and how to conduct an effective process that can lead to valid assessments of capabilities and employee development.

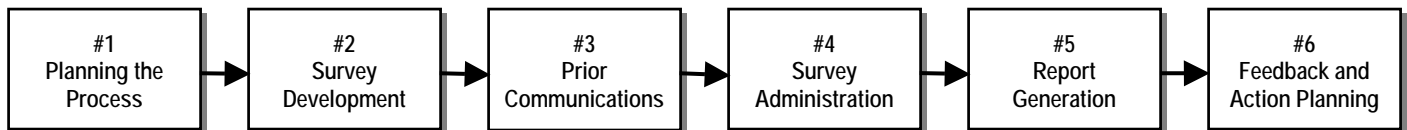
Topics covered in this paper include: steps in the survey process, designing effective surveys, what to look for in feedback reports, and delivering effective feedback and action planning. See the companion *Insight* white paper titled "The Value of 360-Degree Feedback" for a broader discussion on the application and appropriateness of using this kind of assessment.

Steps in the Survey Process

The diagram below illustrates the common steps in a multi-rater survey process. A description of each step follows, along with tips for successful implementation.

FIGURE 1

Steps in the Survey Process



1. **Planning the process.** Many organizations fail to put together a good plan before implementing their multi-rater initiatives. Assuming that a clear purpose for the initiative has already been developed, support from leadership established, and a vendor chosen, some important questions to consider in the planning phase include:
 - Which groups/jobs will be evaluated, and when?
 - How will the survey be developed?
 - How will reports be delivered and feedback facilitated? What role will the managers of participants play?
 - How will raters be assigned? There are several approaches to assigning raters. For an in-depth discussion on this topic, see the *Insight* white paper titled "Guidelines for Selecting Survey Takers in 360-Degree Feedback Surveys."
 - How will the overall process be communicated?
 - Who will manage the process? Censeo recommends that companies appoint an internal project coordinator to oversee the survey implementation and act as a liaison between the online vendor and the organization.

2. **Survey development.** The survey instrument itself is critical to the success of any multi-rater survey initiative. This includes instructions, competencies, items, and the response scale, as well as any open-ended items that may be included. Depending on the objectives for the initiative and the competencies to be measured, you may be able to find a vendor's established survey that will meet your needs, or at least to use as a good starting point. See the section below for more information on developing an effective survey.

3. **Prior communications.** It is important to provide sufficient communications well in advance of the initiative. This reduces participant anxiety around the multi-rater process, improves the response rate, and increases accountability for development. Communications should state the intent of the multi-rater process (how it will and will not be used), any linkages to strategic objectives, benefits to participants, and the timelines involved.

This type of communication is best delivered verbally in company/team meetings, and via email. Depending on the size and purpose of the initiative, consideration should be given to who delivers the initial communication – a senior executive or a line/HR manager. In some situations, it may be more impactful if initial communications come from the senior ranks. It's also important to communicate the process not only to participants, but also their managers and raters.

4. **Survey administration.** The vast majority of companies today use Internet-based multi-rater platforms for reasons of speed, cost and ease of implementation, and they usually use vendors for survey administration and report generation. Find a vendor that has fast and reliable technology, an easy to use platform, and a staff that will be 110% focused on your needs. In addition, look for system functionality that includes the ability to deliver customizable automatic email communications/instructions to participants and raters.

Beyond technology, there are a number of suggestions for making survey administration more effective. One suggestion is to provide specific guidelines to raters. Most people who participate in multi-rater initiatives have little experience giving this type of feedback. At a minimum, provide documentation that explains how to use the rating scales, how to avoid rater bias (halo, leniency, severity, central tendency, etc.), and how to make honest, but constructive open-ended comments, if part of the survey.

A second suggestion is to include assurances of confidentiality in participant instructions. Explain to participants that only they will be able to view their feedback results. In some cases, however, the process is set up so that managers receive the reports first or at the same time as participants. This practice is okay as long as it is communicated up front.

In addition, provide instructions to raters that include assurances of anonymity. Let them know that their names will not be associated with their individual ratings and comments.

5. **Report generation.** Multi-rater reports provide detailed feedback to participants on their strengths and development needs, and the initial steps they might take to begin developing skills. See "What to Look for in Feedback Reports" on the following page for some valuable tips on designing reports. The key point we make here is about the process – It is critical for reports to be generated and delivered to the appropriate parties as soon as possible (1-3 days after survey close-out). Extended delays between the end of the campaign and reporting will reduce momentum, and result in a loss of focus on development.

6. **Feedback and action planning.** There are several ways organizations approach this step. One of the most powerful is through structured feedback sessions, where participants and their managers review the multi-rater results and then develop plans for ongoing skill development. Tips for this step are discussed in more detail in the section titled "Delivering Effective Feedback and Action Planning."

Designing Effective Surveys

To simplify the survey development process and ensure accurate measurement, use the following guidelines.

Develop surveys to target several roles.

In cases where several jobs are involved, it may not be necessary to develop a survey for each job. Instead, look for opportunities to develop the survey based on the most important common competencies and items. For example, an executive leadership survey is typically sufficient to assess the skills of all executives, regardless of their function in the organization.

Link surveys to relevant competencies.

Multi-rater surveys should be linked to the competencies required for a job or job family. That is, the items in the survey should be indicative of the important KSAs and attributes individuals are expected to possess to do their jobs effectively.

Follow the principles of good survey construction.

Complete coverage of how to construct a good multi-rater survey is beyond the scope of this *Insight* white paper, but here are some of the most important criteria to consider when writing items and putting a survey together:

- **Clarity** – Employees understand the meaning and generally interpret the item similarly. Keeping the reading difficulty level low and writing shorter items can help in this regard.
- **Single focus** – Avoid items that deal with two or more topics or have more than one meaning (e.g., “Provides regular development feedback to employees and promotes the right people into key positions”). Raters will be confused and the feedback will be ambiguous.
- **Behavioral in nature** – Items should be written so that the raters can envision the participant performing the behavior. It helps to start items with a verb.
- **Applicable to the chosen response scale** – Different response scales require different syntax for the items. Ensure that there is a fit between the two. See the *Insight* white paper titled “360-Degree Feedback Survey Response Scales” for a more in-depth discussion on how to choose appropriate rating scales.

When putting the survey together make sure that items are grouped under the right competency – that is, they reflect the meaning of that competency. This will make it easier for raters and will ensure that feedback at the competency level makes sense.

In addition, design the survey so that it's no longer than 60-80 items. One way to do this is to include only the most important competencies and behaviors. Lengthy multi-rater surveys lead to two problems: 1) raters become disinterested, resulting in reduced response rates and incomplete and/or inaccurate feedback (especially if raters are providing feedback to several people), and 2) feedback reports become overwhelming.

Include open-ended responses.

Open-ended responses add to the richness of the feedback, further qualifying and explaining the ratings. Make sure, however, that raters are instructed to limit their feedback to constructive comments.

Pilot new surveys.

Solicit a small sample of incumbents and managers who are knowledgeable about the target job(s) and ask them to provide feedback on a draft of the new survey. Have them simulate rating someone (their manager, a peer or subordinate) as they review the items and rating scale.

Their task is to make sure that the instructions are clear, that the right things are being measured, and that items are unambiguous and easy to rate. Debrief afterwards to collect their input.

Pilot the multi-rater process.

If your organization is conducting this type of initiative for the first time, and you plan to roll the process out to several parts of the organization, it can be beneficial to pilot the process with a smaller group first. Run the pilot group through the whole process – from survey administration to feedback – and then collect their comments on the process.

What to Look for in Feedback Reports

Multi-rater reports should provide detailed summaries of each person's results and provide the basis for improving personal effectiveness. In a sense, they are the main “deliverables” from the vendor or internal project manager.

Choose a vendor whose reports can be easily interpreted by participants. Reports should have clear explanations and be cleanly formatted. It's okay to include graphics to display important information, but overuse can unnecessarily muddy the layout and increase the length and complexity of the reports. Providing additional statistics other than averages and means will also increase complexity. The hallmark of a good report is that it can be interpreted without the help of an expert.

Ensure that the reports clearly answer questions participants generally have about their ratings, such as:

- What are my major strengths on which I can build?
- What are the differences between how I see myself and how others see me?
- How do my capabilities compare with other participants?
- What are my most important development needs and what can I do about them?

Organize the report by presenting: 1) summary competency information, 2) specific item ratings, 3) prioritization of strengths and development needs, and 4) information on how to take action on the most important areas for development.

Plan on obtaining group reports when appropriate. Most vendors have the ability to collect organizational hierarchical information in order to aggregate multi-rater data. Group reports should be designed to help managers understand their units' overall strengths and development needs at the competency and item levels. They can then help managers plan coaching, training and development activities.

Delivering Effective Feedback and Action Planning

Even the best surveys and reports have little impact if a solid feedback and action planning process is not in place. Here are a few things to consider including:

- Conduct feedback report workshops, facilitated by an internal or external consultant. These sessions can be used to clarify reports, answer questions, and get people thinking about development. In addition, they can help participants more openly receive feedback that may have challenged their self-perceptions.
- Structure the process so that participants receive scheduled one-on-one feedback and action planning sessions with their managers. Sessions should occur shortly after feedback reports are delivered and workshops have been given – typically within 1-3 weeks. This is long enough for participants to digest the feedback, but short enough that momentum is not lost.
- Provide managers with the skills and expertise necessary to conduct one-on-one meetings with subordinates. This includes being able to explain the purpose of the process and provide necessary coaching. During these meetings, managers and participants should work together to devise a mutually acceptable development plan.
- Conduct follow-up multi-rater assessments to measure improvement. Typically this should occur in 12-18 months to allow participants time to develop. Shorter intervals are possible, however, depending on what the organization is trying to accomplish. See the *Insight* white paper titled “How Frequently Should 360-Degree Feedback be Administered? It All Depends...” for more detailed information.
- Provide a structure that will ensure accountability. Communicate the importance of feedback and action planning to managers. Make leaders aware that they need to continually follow up and reinforce their people. This is extremely important to driving employee development.

Guidelines for Development Planning

- Focus on two or three development needs at a time. The idea is to make development manageable and not overwhelm participants.
- Leverage the suggested development actions from the feedback report (if available) regarding critical development needs. Think creatively about additional actions that would be appropriate, and record them. Be careful not to plan too many actions!
- Emphasize on-the-job activities and self-study that participants can engage in to develop themselves. This allows participants to take immediate control of their own development. It's cost effective and can deliver better results. Although formal training has its place, research shows that 70-80% of all development takes place on the job through different work experiences.
- Record the agreed-upon plan, including target completion dates and progress report dates. By putting it in writing, commitment to action will more likely occur.

In Conclusion

This *Insight* white paper has provided a brief overview of the multi-rater process and some important tips in implementing and managing an effective initiative. In some cases, we have not drilled down to all the details. A good consultant, with expertise in multi-rater projects, can guide you through the details in the process and help you avoid mistakes companies sometimes make. As a final point, while survey expertise and solid technology are critical for successful campaigns, strong company commitment to employee development *after the assessment* is what truly makes a multi-rater process effective.

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.