Make it Successful:
5 Ways to Prepare Your Employees for 360 Feedback
INTRODUCTION

Employees want feedback and organizations want to develop their employees to build better, more productive workforces. Conducting 360-degree employee reviews seem like an obvious win-win. But all too often organizations fail to communicate the feedback goals effectively and, as a result, employees enter the process with a lot of uncertainty.

One of the most important ways to ensure a successful 360-feedback process is to properly prepare your employees. It increases engagement in the process, leads to better feedback and generates greater willingness to change based on the outcomes.

So how do you best prepare your employees? Here are five important steps to consider:

1. Define your objectives
2. Communicate your purpose
3. State your expectations
4. Disclose anonymity or attribution
5. Provide an open forum for questions and concerns
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Define your objectives

You may remember the quintessential conversation Alice in Wonderland had with the Cheshire Cat:

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”
“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.
“I don’t much care where—“ said Alice.
“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

Too many organizations begin their 360-review process Alice in Wonderland-style. They do 360s because they know they should, but they don’t take time to figure out where they want to go and what objectives they want to achieve. Before running forward, figure out where you’re going by defining the goals of your 360 process.

What competencies are important to your organization? How will you measure them and what will managers do with the data they get? Are you going to evaluate only top-level leaders or will you include mid-level managers, emerging leaders, or the entire organization as well?

Defining your objectives is essential to determining which competencies to measure, what questions to ask, and who to involve.
Employees want feedback. What they don’t want is a black box filled with uncertainty and ambiguity. If you don’t clearly communicate the purpose of your 360 process, you may inadvertently stir up confusion, fear and doubt. It’s important to let your employees know up front why you’re collecting the data and how you plan to use it.

Just as important as knowing “why” and “how” is knowing “what.” Once you’ve determined what competencies matter to your organization, make sure to communicate them clearly to employees. Knowing what skills and attributes will be measured goes a long way in reducing anxiety and providing employees clarity of purpose.

Further, if the 360-review is for development purposes, tell employees what resources you’ll provide them after the process is over to help them enhance their strengths and further develop in areas where they’re weak. If you plan to use the 360 as part of the performance appraisal process or to determine succession opportunities, be clear about that as well. Whatever you decide, just be upfront about it and clearly communicate it to your employees.
State your expectations

In many cases you will have employees who’ve never participated in a 360 evaluation before or who’ve had a negative or overly stressful experience with them in the past. Use this opportunity to give all participants a refresher on how the process works and what your expectations are.

Determine what role different people will play in establishing those expectations. Executive leadership should set the tone by making it clear that they are behind the 360 employee development effort because they know it will help each employee become more effective and, in turn, lead to a stronger company. Managers should express confidence in their employees’ ability to evaluate themselves and others with honesty and objectivity. They should take the opportunity to walk employees through the evaluation, including the skills, traits, and attributes on which they’ll be assessed.

Lastly, one of the most challenging parts of any 360-degree employee feedback process is just getting people to complete the evaluations. Organizations have much more successful 360 processes when they clearly define expectations not only regarding what employees are expected to do, but also when they’re expected to do it. HR managers should play a key role in laying out a clear and feasible timeline.
Let all the participants know exactly who will see the feedback and whether it will be attributed or anonymous.

Many organizations choose to make all 360 assessments anonymous because they feel it allows employees to give genuine feedback and avoid unnecessary bias. Other organizations make upward and peer feedback anonymous, but make all manager comments attributable. There are even a few organizations where no comments are anonymous.

Whatever you decide, be sure to clearly disclose it to employees in advance so there are no surprises when the feedback reports come in. Nothing can harm the credibility of the 360 process or a management or HR team faster than betraying employees’ trust because of failure to disclose how feedback would be communicated.
Despite all your best efforts to prepare your employees for the 360 process, there will likely still be some employee angst. Help dispel this by establishing an open forum where employees can ask questions before, during, and after the 360 process.

Employees will often ask helpful questions that will help you design the process to better fit your organization and ask the right questions to help your managers get the insights they need. You’ll often find questions that point to common concerns you may have overlooked. And after the process is complete, employees will generally have relevant questions about how to use the insights they received and valuable suggestions about how to make the process better in the future.

By establishing a safe and open forum to discuss questions and concerns, you are giving participants a voice. This key differentiator will help ensure buy-in and will make employees more open to the feedback they receive.
Conclusion

An organization is only as strong as its people. Gathering 360-degree employee feedback is an essential part of developing great employees because it provides employees with feedback from a variety of sources – managers, peers, direct reports, and external evaluators. If employees aren’t getting this range of feedback, they aren’t being given the opportunities to develop that they need to be successful. That hurts both the employee and the organization.

As you properly prepare employees for the 360-feedback process, you greatly enhance your ability to create a successful and rewarding 360 experience. So remember: define your objectives, communicate your purpose, state your expectations, disclose anonymity or attribution, and provide an open forum for questions and concerns.

Qualtrics 360 TIP

Use the customizable “Welcome Message” space as another avenue for communicating with participants and setting expectations. Imagine how helpful it would be to embed a video of the CEO greeting and educating each participant upon login. With the “Welcome Message” space you have complete creative control to set the tone for each evaluation.

To learn more about Qualtrics 360, request a free demo by clicking here.
About Qualtrics

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Founded in 2002, Qualtrics serves more than 5,000 enterprises worldwide, including half of the Fortune 100 and 96 of the top 100 business schools. For more information and a free trial, visit www.qualtrics.com.