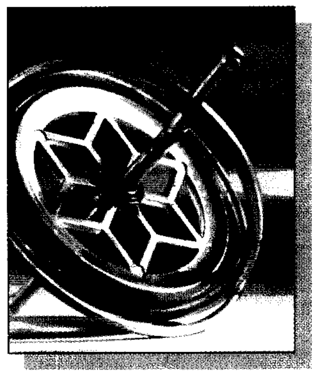
Eight Ways To Make 360-Degree Feedback Work For You

"Three-hundred-and-sixty-degree feedback is a process that enables people to receive feedback on their job performance from a number of people, such as peers, direct reports and managers," says Richard A. Swanson, co-author with Elwood F. Holton III of *Foundations of Human Resource Development* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.). "While it has become increasingly popular, its effectiveness can vary widely depending on how it's used.



"One of the main reasons for this is the fact that the whole process is based upon perception data, 'perception' being defined as a personal feeling, impression, belief or comprehension of an object, event or quality that may or may not be factual. Not only does each individual who puts in data have a perception, the person receiving the feedback has a perception — it can be very tender. That's why all parties giving feedback must remain anonymous."

Swanson, principal of St. Paul, Minn.-based Swanson and Associates, a consulting firm specializing in performance improvement, suggests the following for making 360-degree feedback work for your company:

1. Enable participants to contribute to the design of the 360-degree feedback system.

Whether you hire an external firm or use internal experts to administer the 360-degree feedback tool, make sure you include the people being evaluated in the tool's development. "Not just managers, [include people] from the front line on up," says Swanson. "Contributions can be as simple as changing the language of a question to including questions not included on the original survey tool."

2. Develop a competency standard with careful consideration and much feedback from the people who will use it and experts in the field.

"The more you can connect the process with your company's competencies, core values or strategic initiatives, the more you maintain the authenticity of the process and keep it from becoming a popularity contest," explains Swanson. "Get as much input as you can into the development process up front."

3. Develop a system that will not require employees to spend excessive time learning and then using it.

While there is a learning curve with any new process, using 360-degree feedback should not distract employees from their regular workloads. "How long it takes to learn to use the system may vary, but in general, if it takes more than an hour to fill it out, it's probably too complicated," says Swanson.

4. Run a small trial before implementing the system across the organization.

Choose a select group of managers and other employees to test the process. Ask them to fill out the tool for a specific person, and then separately, to give the group feedback on how it was to work through the tool. Let people know that there are no right or wrong answers — you are just seeking their honest input.

5. Make changes to the system based on the feedback from the trial.

Once you get feedback from all participants in the trial, search for common complaints and make changes accordingly. If the whole process is out of sync, you might consider running a second trial after changes have been made.

6. Educate everyone in the organization before implementing the system.

"You can do this in many ways, including discussing it at staff meetings, publishing an article in your newsletter or Web site, meeting with people on an individual basis, or you might want to use a strategy that combines all of these communication vehicles," advises Swanson. "What's important is that people are thoroughly informed about the 360-degree feedback process and how it works."

7. Ensure confidentiality is maintained for participants.

"Make sure that you have written statements that clearly define the degree of confidentiality required in the process," says Swanson.

8. Monitor the success of the system and modify it appropriately.

Just like any other process, build in evaluation points to assess how the 360-degree process is working for you. Are you getting the information you need? Why or why not? Identify gap areas and make changes accordingly. "Ultimately, it's what you do with the data that's important," concludes Swanson. ●

Study Reveals How Often Employees Are Using Technology On And Off The Job

A study of 1,003 employees recently released by the Families and Work Institute reveals that 41 percent of employees often or very often use technology (cellular/mobile phones, beepers, pagers, computers, e-mail and fax machines) for their jobs during non-work hours or days. Thirty-eight percent of this group reported feeling overworked vs. 28 percent of employees who rarely or never use technology for their jobs during non-work time.

Twenty-two percent of employees say that they often or very often have to be accessible to their employers during non-work hours and non-work days. Forty-one percent of this group report high levels of feeling overworked vs. 31 percent of those who rarely or never have to be accessible. ●