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MAKING 360-DEGREE FEEDBACK EFFECTIVE*

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ABSTRACT

Organizational performance is of paramount importance in today's competitive business world. To prosper and grow, organizations need constant improvement in their performance. This implies performance management and performance appraisal play an essential role in improving organizational performance. Managers have been exploring ways to improve the efficacy of performance appraisal and there is a growing use of 360-degree feedback. This paper attempts to review from the literature the key basic concepts of 360 degree feedback including its purposes as well as potential benefits and problems, discussion on related critical issues in a comprehensive manner. Several major issues are: (1) the number of rater sources that should be included, (2) how feedback should be used, (3) whether ratings should remain anonymous, (4) whether feedback is effective, (5) the reliability issue, and (6) whether it is easy to implement such a system in Hong Kong. Concluding remarks and direction for future research will be provided in the last part.

INTRODUCTION

In today's highly competitive world, every organization is compelled to manage its overall performance through managing employee's individual performance. Organizations have been exploring ways to better assess employee performance. It is found that the use of 360-degree feedback has become more and more common since the 1990s (Church & Bracken, 1997; Fletcher & Baldry, 2000; Hedge, Borman, & Birkeland, 2001). Owing to its rising popularity, this paper attempts to review and critically analyze this relatively new human resources management practice and shed lights on how to make this appraisal method effective.

According to Lepsinger and Lucia (1997), the provision of feedback on productivity by an individual's supervisor was not uncommon, even at the beginning of the last century. However, people tended to focus on 'downward feedback' from the supervisor that offered only a limited perspective on an individual's performance. Until the mid-1960s and early 1970s, people started to study the effect of subordinate feedback and found that it was useful and effective for improving managerial performance. A study in the US by the Center for Creative Leadership in the 1980s discovered that people's assessment of an individual varied with their role as a supervisor, a subordinate, a peer, or a customer. People began to realize the value of feedback from different sources. The rise in competition, a renewed focus on customers and the movement towards flatter organizational structures in the 1990s created a higher need for feedback from various relevant parties, including not only the supervisor(s),

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but also the subordinates, peers, self, and customers. These changes have made 360-degree feedback more and more popular.

This paper first will review the key basic concepts of 360-degree feedback including its meaning, purposes and uses, and potential benefits and problems, to help discuss the later critical issues. Several major 360-degree issues will then be discussed including; (1) the number of rater sources that should be included, (2) how feedback should be used, (3) whether ratings should remain anonymous, (4) whether feedback is effective, (5) the reliability issue, and (6) whether it is easy to implement it in Hong Kong. The last part will draw some major conclusions from the previous sections.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON 360-DEGREE FEEDBACK CONCEPTS

Meaning and Purpose of 360-degree Feedback

There is no universal definition for 360-degree feedback. Although the method is also named as multi-rater, multi-source feedback and full-circle feedback, it generally refers to collecting feedback on an individual's performance from the key constituencies representing the entire cycle of relevant viewpoints (Warech, Smither, Reilly, Millsap & Reilly 1998). The entire cycle, as seen by some authors, includes the ratee's supervisor(s), peers, subordinates, and the ratee himself/herself (Antonioni & Park 2001; Atwater, Waldman, & Brett 2002; Tornow 1993; Waldman, Atwater, & Antonioni 1998).

Other authors include additional potential raters like internal and external customers and even suppliers (Borman 1997; Day, 2001; Fletcher & Baldry 1999; Ghorpade 2000; Lepsinger & Lucia, 1997; London 1995; Mount, Judge, Scullen, Sytsma, and Hezlett 1998). It is often done on an anonymous basis (Antonioni & Park 2001; Brett & Atwater 2001; Ghorpade, 2000; London & Smither 1995; Mount et al. 1998). However, ratings done by supervisors cannot remain anonymous if there is only one supervisor who does the rating (Antonioni & Park 2001; Mount et al. 1998). Although the terminology may be relatively new, there has been a long history of collecting feedback from multiple sources to gain insight into incumbent performance (Hedge, Borman, & Birkeland 2001; Moses, Hollenbeck, & Sorcher 1993).

Despite the fact that many people use the term 360-degree feedback, very few notice that it was actually trademarked by TEAMS International more than two decades ago (Bracken, Timmreck, & Church 2001, p. xxv). The term 'multi-source feedback' is often treated as synonymous to '360-degree feedback' as it is often not the case in practice to collect feedback from all the key sources. In fact, multi-source feedback can be treated as a subset of 360-degree feedback, as in practice, feedback may only be collected from two or more sources rather than from all the relevant sources. Thus, it can be assumed that 360-degree feedback and multi-source feedback can be used interchangeably (Lepsinger & Lucia 1997). Basically, 360-degree feedback can be used for any individuals at any levels in an organization, it is predominantly used for managers (Ghorpade 2000; Lepsinger & Lucia 1997) serving both evaluation and development purposes.

The literature shows that 360-degree feedback is primarily used for developmental purposes and is sometimes used for evaluation purposes like decisions for salary adjustment and promotion (Fletcher & Baldry 2000; Lepsinger & Lucia 1997; London & Smither 1995). Other than these two purposes, there are some other uses. They include, for example: (1) career and succession planning, (2) measuring client and customer-related perceptions and behaviours, (3) general cultural assessment, and (4) organizational change and improvement (Church & Bracken 1997; Lepsinger & Lucia 1997; Waldman & Atwater 1998).

Benefits and Problems of 360-degree Feedback

Driven by the potential benefits of 360-degree feedback, managers attempt to adopt this relatively new system in organizations. Nevertheless the system is not without problems, there are some issues and pitfalls that need to be addressed and overcome. The following table summarizes the potential benefits and problems of adopting such a system.

TABLE 1
Potential Benefits and Problems of Adopting 360-Degree Feedback

Potential Benefits	Potential Problems
Increased organizational commitment of those being asked to give feedback	Subordinates fear that managers who receive poor ratings may retaliate
Positive reinforcement for managers receiving positive feedback	Managers might be defensive or show denial towards negative feedback
Enhanced interest in receiving subsequent feedback	Ratings made by different sources might be conflicting that makes the manager not knowing what he/she should do
Improved communication between the manager and his/her subordinates, superior(s), peers, and customers	Managers' self-esteem might be lowered if feedback received is much more negative than expected
Behaviours of the manager can be improved based on the feedback	It promotes game-playing among the various parties
Organizational culture can be changed to become more participative and open	Time-consuming and costly
Extra source of information for the formal performance appraisal	Increased expectations coupled with lack of change
	360-degree feedback is just another management fad

DISCUSSIONS ON KEY 360-DEGREE FEEDBACK ISSUES

The following discussion focuses some of the major issues related to Table 1. These issues of adopting 360-degree feedback will be analyzed based on theoretical arguments and research/empirical findings. It is expected to facilitate practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of the key 360-degree feedback issues.

How Many Sources of Raters should be Included?

Theoretically, there should be involvement of as many sources of raters as possible since it is believed that by doing so a more complete picture of a ratee's behaviour or performance can be obtained (Pollack & Pollack 1996). Collecting feedback from multiple sources will get more reliable and valid results for the ratee (Church & Bracken 1997). Besides, there can be an improved legal defensibility over ratings by a single source (Pollack & Pollack 1996). Ratees also tend to see more sources of ratings as fairer and more acceptable (Hurley, 1998).

However, there are practical difficulties of involving as many raters as possible as identified by those scholars. According to Hedge, Borman, and Birkeland (2001), each rating source has its limitations. Supervisors may not be able to observe much of the day-to-day work performance of their subordinates. Peers and subordinates often do not have experience and training in making performance feedback. In addition, subordinates may only see a part of their supervisors' job performance. Lastly, self-ratings may be subject to inflated ratings. In fact, the occurrence of inflated self-ratings has been confirmed in many studies (e.g., Harris & Schaubroeck 1988; Nilsen & Campbell 1993). The inclusion of external customers

in the feedback provision process is not recommended as concluded from a survey (Pollack & Pollack 1996). This is mainly because customers are often better at evaluating products/services rather than individuals and they often see the final products/services but not the work of the employee.

How should 360-degree Feedback be used?

As mentioned previously, there are two general purposes of adopting 360-degree feedback, namely, developmental and evaluative. A survey done by London and Smither (1995) on organizations having adopted some form of 360-degree feedback found that 50% of them used it exclusively for developmental purpose but there were still 50% of them using it for both purposes. Moreover, there is an increasing trend of using it for evaluative purposes (Fletcher & Baldry 2000; London & Smither 1995; Waldman, Atwater, & Antonioni 1998). It is often argued that these feedback data should preferably be used for developmental, rather than for evaluative purposes (Ghorpade, 2000; London & Smither 1995). Also, research findings have confirmed that 360-degree feedback is seen more positively for developmental purposes than for administrative purposes (Bettenhausen & Fedor 1997; Pollack & Pollack 1996).

One possible explanation is that ratings will be biased if they are not used for developmental purposes. This has been demonstrated in a 360-degree feedback follow-up survey. It was found that 34% of the subordinates thought that they would have rated their superior differently if the feedback had been intended for the superior's performance evaluation, rather than for developmental purpose (London, Wohlers, & Gallagher, 1990). However, it is inevitable that 360-degree feedback will be more often used for evaluative purposes as more and more organizations stress performance and pay according to merit and performance. No matter where the focus will be put, the guidelines listed below can shed lights on making 360-degree feedback system look fair and more acceptable to the people concerned (DeNisi & Kluger, 2000; Farr & Newman 2000; Ghorpade 2000):

- Allow ratees to have input in the rater selection process (including self-ratings);
- Procedures for choosing rater source and individual raters should be made known and applied consistently;
- Explicit procedures exist for maximizing the job relevance and information basis for the ratings made by each source of rater;
- Exclude raters who have potential conflicts of interest with the target ratee;
- Implement the system gradually (provided that employees view the process as nonthreatening, fair, and beneficial); and
- Tell employees as early as possible if 360-degree ratings are used for evaluative purposes.

Should 360-degree Ratings be Anonymous?

Many 360-degree feedback systems allow for anonymity of raters to ratees, except when there is only one supervisor that his/her identity must be known to the target ratee. London, Smither, and Adsit (1997) assert that all parties appear to want low accountability for themselves (i.e. not to disclose their own identity) but high accountability from others (i.e. others to disclose their identity).

The importance of anonymity can be shown by a follow-up survey after 360-degree feedback had been provided to managers. It was found that 24% of subordinates would have rated their supervisors differently if their identity had not been kept confidential (London, Wohlers, & Gallagher 1990). This indicates that ratings will be different if raters are not kept anonymous. Another study by Antonioni (1994) showed that managers were more positive towards upward feedback if subordinates identified themselves. This poses a dilemma for

management of an organization as ratees want raters to be identified while raters want to remain anonymous. There is also limited research on comparing the feedback ratings from named raters to anonymous raters (Fletcher & Baldry, 1999). Hence, it is still uncertain whether named or anonymous ratings are better. However, given the findings in the survey done by Pollack and Pollack (1996), it is expected that named raters to be less honest in their responses, for fear of retaliation by the feedback recipient.

How effective is 360-degree Feedback?

Research advocates that feedback increases the accuracy of self-perceptions and informs the relevant ratee the need for behavioural change. Managers who seldom get feedback from others are prone to have inaccurate self-perceptions and remain ignorant regarding others' perceptions (Yammarino & Atwater 1997). Brett and Atwater (2001) state another assumption that negative feedback or discrepant feedback, i.e. self-ratings higher than others' ratings, will create awareness and motivate individuals to change behaviour.

Although it is generally expected that feedback from multiple sources can help ratees change their behaviour and improve their job performance, a meta-analysis by Kluger and DeNisi (1996) revealed that feedback interventions did not always lead to performance improvement. They found that not all feedback interventions led to improvements. In more than one-third of the cases, feedback actually led to decreased performance. Also, the authors found that people were often discouraged instead of motivated to improve when they received negative feedback. Another study by Brett and Atwater (2001) indicates that negative feedback (low ratings or lower than expected ratings) is not seen as useful or accurate. It will not lead to enlightenment or awareness but rather will lead to negative reactions such as discouragement and anger.

Hence, the above-mentioned studies show that feedback does not always lead to behavioural change and performance improvement. In order to make feedback more effective, DeNisi and Kluger (2000) have made the following suggestions:

- Concentrate on the task and task performance but not the ratee or any part of the ratee's self-concept;
- Feedback should be presented in ways not threatening the ego of the recipient;
- Include information concerning how to improve performance;
- Incorporate a formal goal-setting plan together with the feedback; and
- Minimize information on the relative performance of others and maximize information about performance improvements.

Hence, the above-mentioned studies show that feedback does not always lead to

Reliability of 360-degree Feedback

Reliability of 360-degree feedback is an important issue as it is a necessary condition for validity, though not sufficient. Past research often focused on within-source rating reliability/ agreement and between-source rating reliability/agreement. The study conducted by Greguras and Robie (1998) shows that there is low within-source agreement in ratings. Nevertheless, supervisor ratings, among the different sources, tend to be more reliable than peer and subordinate ratings. In order to increase rating reliability/agreement, it is suggested increasing the number of raters for each source of ratings. The study by Conway and Huffcutt (1997) shows similar results with low to moderate within-source agreement in ratings. Likewise, supervisor ratings show the highest level of agreement ($r = 0.50$), followed by peers ($r = 0.37$), and lastly by subordinates ($r = 0.30$).

Regarding between-source rating agreement, two meta-analyses had been conducted to examine the relationships between various rating sources. It is found in Harris and Schaubroeck's study (1988) that there was a higher correlation, i.e. agreement between peer

and supervisor ratings ($r = 0.62$) than self-peer ratings ($r = 0.36$) and self-supervisor ratings ($r = 0.35$). Yet, the agreement between subordinate and other ratings are not covered in this meta-analysis. Similar results have been found in Conway and Huffcutt's meta-analysis (1997). Highest between-source agreement was found between peers and supervisors ($r = 0.34$). The correlation of self-peer ratings was only 0.19 and self-supervisor ratings was just 0.22. The researchers have also studied agreement of subordinate-other ratings in their meta-analysis. However, the correlations of subordinate ratings with other ratings were not as high as those with supervisor ratings.

The low to moderate correlations do not necessarily mean low between-source agreement from the practitioners' perspective. Both meta-analysis studies reached the conclusion that the low-to-moderate agreement might reflect the fact that different sources had somewhat different views on performance and had different opportunities to observe job performance (Conway & Huffcutt 1997; Harris & Schaubroeck 1988). For practitioners, there is limited need to collect ratings from various sources if there is already a high between-source rating agreement (Borman 1997).

360-degree Feedback in the Hong Kong Context

A search from literature finds that there is very limited research on 360-degree feedback in the Hong Kong context. In Hong Kong, 360-degree feedback has been implemented mainly by multinational companies operating in Hong Kong as reported in an article in the Asian Wall Street Journal by Marshall (1999). It seems to be more difficult to implement 360-degree feedback in Hong Kong, particularly for ratings done by subordinates since Hong Kong is of higher power distance than that in the United States in terms of national culture (Hofstede 1980, 2001). There is also a greater acceptance of inequality and relationships in Hong Kong are characterized by higher respect for authority.

Hong Kong managers are unlikely to welcome being rated by their subordinates, particularly for evaluative purpose. Although 360-degree feedback may not be used for evaluation purposes, people's worry and fear about its use in evaluations still exist. Besides, there is a trend for its use in evaluative purposes in addition to the intended developmental purpose. This can be confirmed by the assertion made by Kirkbride and Westwood (1993) and findings from Snape and his associates (1998). Hong Kong managers tend to favor less participative and more top-down form of performance evaluation and feedback. This reflects the need to take culture into account when 360-feedback system is to be implemented.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

There has been a rising use of 360-degree feedback in different types of organizations. Its adoption is often based on the assumptions that a more complete picture of one's behaviour and performance can be obtained from multi-source feedback. Behaviours and performance can thus be changed and improved. It is mostly used for development purposes though there is an increasing use as a performance appraisal tool for evaluative purposes. Because of its more common use for evaluation purposes, suggestions have been made in this paper to make it fairer and acceptable to employees. Yet, both potential benefits and drawbacks exist for its adoption. Being sensitive to the issues discussed in this paper is necessary if its benefits are to be maximized while at the same time its possible problems are to be minimized.

In general, the more sources of feedback to be collected, the more information regarding a ratee's behaviour and performance can be got. However, there might be some practical difficulties affecting the sources of information to be collected. For example, there may be no direct contact between a ratee and his/her customers. This makes collection of feedback from customers more difficult and less meaningful. Supervisors have been found to

be the most reliable source of feedback while self-ratings are often inflated. It is generally recommended that 360-degree feedback be used for developmental rather than evaluative purposes. If it is used for evaluative purposes as well, the guidelines as discussed before can be followed.

It is also difficult to determine whether ratings should be anonymous or not as there is no conclusive evidence as to which is better. Unlike the general belief, 360-degree feedback is not as effective as one may think. To improve its effectiveness, the suggestions mentioned in this paper can serve as a reference. It has been found that within-source rating agreement is generally low while between-source rating agreement is just low to moderate. To increase within-source rating reliability, it is suggested using more raters for each source. It may not be a problem for low to moderate between-source rating agreement as this may just reflect differences in rating dimensions due to different opportunities in observing ratee's behaviours by various rating sources. There is also a view that it would be harder to implement 360-degree feedback in Hong Kong due to its different culture, which is not conducive to use the system.

In conclusion, the notion of 360-degree feedback is good despite the practical difficulties that may be encountered in its implementation. It should be beneficial to organizations and their members if the negative impacts of the various potential problems identified in this paper are reduced. Hence, the issues discussed in this paper provide direction for researchers to explore so that the effectiveness of 360-degree feedback could be improved.

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