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Best Practices for 360 Feedback Programs and Employee Assessment Surveys (April 2012)

360 feedback programs are utilized by companies of all sizes to provide employees with an invaluable tool for personal and career development. Careful planning can ensure the success of these initiatives and help a company maximize the benefit to all involved. This article details some of the best practices to keep in mind for your own 360 feedback programs.

★ What is a 360?

The essence of a 360 degree program is that employees are assessed by the full range of people they work with - peers, managers, subordinates, and in some cases, internal or external clients, as well as a self-assessment. The results (usually anonymous) then go back to the employee, completing the circle. The 360 is normally used as a self-development and coaching tool. While 360 programs may be part of a broader performance appraisal program, this must be approached with care to ensure it will not interfere with the level of trust on which a good 360 program is rooted.

★ Survey Design

A 360 survey typically consists of ratings of behaviors and competencies, combined with an opportunity for open-ended comments. Design the survey using attributes important to your organization and relevant to employees' development. Use either internal resources, or engage an outside HR consultant with expertise in 360 programs to construct the assessment questionnaire. Open-ended comments often provide the most valuable feedback to the employee; however, they are also the most time consuming for assessors to provide thoughtful responses. A proper balance of scaled closed-ended and open-ended comments should be the goal in survey design.

★ Participation

Keep in mind that a critical element for success is broad participation. You'll want employees to complete their assigned assessments with a high degree of focus, thoughtfulness and attention to their responses. This takes time, and employees' time must be respected. Be sure to allow adequate opportunity for employees to complete their assessments. Avoid administering a 360 program during the company's busy season, and wherever practical, make allowances for employees who may be travelling or on vacation.

★ Communicate

Good communication of the program will also contribute to its success. Involvement of senior management will help show a top-level commitment and also can be used to dispel anxiety relating to employees' trust and openness of responses. Full and clear explanations of the purpose, how data will be used, and how it will be protected should be communicated to all stakeholders in the process - those being assessed as well as the feedback providers. Use of a third-party administrator is also highly recommended to increase the level of trust of the program.

★ Implementation

From the point of view of those providing feedback (the assessors), the implementation should facilitate an organized, well-structured and easy-to-complete design. Each participating employee may be tasked with completing assessments for several peers, managers, etc., and the process should make it easy to organize his or her assessments and track which have been completed. A well-designed web-based 360 implementation will send just a single email to each assessor, with a link to a web page which monitors the status of survey completion status for each assessment they need to complete. At DataStar, we call this the "status page," a simple table which displays the names, survey links and completion status for each assessment that employee is responsible for. Additional real-time reporting of response rates will give program administrators the information they need to gauge participation and help determine when additional reminders are required.

★ Reporting

Typically, the results of 360 programs are disseminated directly to the participants. The output must be user-friendly and understandable to employees at many levels. We generally keep it very simple - average ratings on behaviors and competencies broken down by level of response (peer, manager, etc.), along with a complete listing of verbatim comments. Often the comments are "cleansed" to remove names and sometimes profanity. In the data analysis, steps can be taken to combine small groups so anonymity of responses can be preserved.

DataStar is a leading provider of 360 surveys, leadership assessments and other employee feedback programs. We have developed a unique system to manage the process from database development, communication of assessment tool to employees, data collection and reporting. Our focus is on the implementation. We manage all the logistics, allowing our clients to provide the training, coaching and other critical elements of employee development which they do best.