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Marianne Di Pierro
Western Michigan University, marianne.dipierro@wmich.edu

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Considerations for 360 Degree Assessment – A Proposed Tool for Leadership and Professional Development at Western Michigan University

Marianne Di Pierro Ph.D., Graduate Research and Retention, Graduate College
WMU – Academic Leadership Academy 2016-2017

OVERVIEW

DEFINITION
360 Degree Assessment is also known as multi-rater feedback or multi-source assessment, a process utilized by organizations to solicit information from a variety of workplace perspectives (subordinate, lateral, supervisory, customer) on an employee’s work-related performance. It can be used for developmental purposes and also for evaluation purposes.

PURPOSE: Provides a data-driven assessment to attain the strategic goals of an organization via workforce development. 360 Degree Assessment is a developmental tool used to enhance employees’ work skills and behavior and has risen to prominence due to HR outsourcing, as well as the rise of the Internet and accessibility to on-line surveys. It is used for learning and developmental purposes of participants and also for evaluation purposes.

360 Degree Assessment covers a wide spectrum of competencies: shared vision and mission; ethics and integrity; leadership; conflict resolution; resourcefulness; teamwork; communication; organizational skills; decisiveness; drive, adaptability; flexibility. It is considered to be a component of a performance management system and is part of the feedback and development that a performance management system can provide to an organization. It can also be used in conjunction with Six-Sigma quality programs to establish employee merit ratings.

BACKGROUND OF 360 DEGREE ASSESSMENT

MILITARY BACKGROUND: During World War II, the German military gathered feedback from multiple sources, including subordinates, to ascertain the military performance of soldiers. The United States had already incorporated this appraisal system in World War I, but without feedback from subordinates. Both the American and German military connected these merit ratings to promotions and pay.

CORPORATE BACKGROUND: The first documented use of surveys for 360 Degree Assessment was in the 1950’s by the Essex Research and Engineering Company, which was eventually bought out by Exxon Mobile. Today, nearly all Fortune 1000 companies have either implemented 360 Degree Assessment or have plans to do so.

UNIVERSITIES and UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS:
- University of Queensland, Australia
- University of Minnesota
- University of Michigan, Ross School of Business
- Stanford Graduate School of Business
- Harvard University Leader Development Program
- Duke University, Fuqua School of Business
- institutional implementation

ADVANTAGES OF IMPLEMENTATION

Participants receive a wide spectrum of perspectives to incorporate into their professional development plans and career goal initiatives.
Participants receive feedback directly aligned with an organization’s core competencies and Strategic Plan.
As a result of employee growth and evolution, organizations can evolve and prosper in cultures that value self-actualization along a spectrum of competencies.
Heightens the awareness of the laissez-faire supervisor or the distanced supervisor regarding the performance of their subordinates.
Cultivates team work.
Reduces discrimination risk: “Horns or Halo” effect by virtue of having multiple raters.

CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTATION

Lack of Workforce Preparation: failure to “set the stage.”
Cost: financial costs; time commitment for gathering data; analysis; review; and for providing critical feedback to participants – post assessment.
Report Overload: layers of individuals writing assessments: peers; direct reports; supervisors.
Lack of Customized Tools: 360 Degree Assessment feedback is not unilaterally applicable to all organizations and across all types of jobs. The design of specific assessment tools for individual organizations is necessary.
Feedback Providers’ Subjectivity Factors and Motivations: manipulation of data; interrater variation; rater bias; insufficient knowledge regarding employees’ work and its organizational alignment with the Strategic Plan; validity and reliability of feedback in employment decisions.
Demoralization/ Rejection/Decline in Morale: Privileging of a few negative comments which take precedence over positive commentary.

360 DEGREE ASSESSMENT USAGE DEBATE

This Debate Concerns how Organizations should Employ Assessment Outcomes. Developmental Purposes vs. Performance Evaluation Purposes.
When used for Performance Evaluation, outcomes can unfairly influence employment decisions such as promotion and/or salary increase.
When used for Developmental Purposes, the Assessment can be used to indicate “stretch goals.”

COMMON MISTAKES IN IMPLEMENTATION

Failure to align 360 Degree Assessment with an organization’s Strategic Plan.
Failure to ensure that raters provide relevant/accurate feedback.
Failure to use the feedback and to coach for success: lack of communication/Failure to “close the informational feedback loop”
Inadequate planning and implementation: the wrong tool and a flawed process.
Failure to establish competencies and skills to be evaluated.
Failure to identify broad themes from multiple respondents (raters) and focus instead on isolated feedback elements: either positive or negative.
Using the Assessment to make promotion/salary decisions.
Failure to integrate the process into a component of a larger performance management system.

IMPLEMENT 360 DEGREE ASSESSMENT WITH LEADERS: Example: University of Minnesota 360 Degree Assessment for Senior Leadership (other than Deans) using a Web-Based Instrument

Supports the following: 1. developmental and evaluative outcomes; 2. the broad goals of leadership excellence and managerial accountability; 3. the efficient use of resources.

360 Degree Assessment of Senior Leadership begins with the following 4 Leadership Competencies for Senior Leaders:
- Strategic Leadership: Shapes Strategic Focus; Demonstrates Financial Acumen; Ensures Alignment
- Results Leadership: Ensures Execution; Leads Change
- People Leadership: Communicates Openly and Listens; Influences and Inspires; Builds Relationships and Fosters Collaboration; Builds Talent
- Personal Leadership: Establishes Trust; Demonstrates Emotional Acuity

360 Degree Assessment of Senior Leaders is a developmental review process that also incorporates an optional performance coaching component, the focus of which is determined by the review outcomes. Goal: To provide an opportunity to the Senior Leader being reviewed to receive performance feedback and to note areas where leadership development would be of benefit.

360 Degree Web-Based Instrument

Purpose: To assess a Senior Leader’s capabilities against the 4 core leadership competencies identified, and to gain feedback from colleagues who interact with/observe the senior leader on a regular basis.

Methodology:
- A. Assessment data is gathered from a small group of individuals who use the 4 core leadership competencies as the basis for evaluation. The standardized web-based tool is used and is administered by an outside vendor.
- In consultation with the Senior Leader’s direct administrator, the Senior Leader selects approximately 20 raters from across this group: University or external administrative peers, associates, direct reports, others within the leader’s administrative unit and/or the leader’s direct administrator.

B. The Senior Leader being assessed also conducts a self-assessment.

Frequency and Timing of Assessment: For established Senior Leaders already in place, a minimum of once every 3 years; for new Senior Leaders: Assessment should be conducted within the first 12 months.

Review Process: An outside vendor administers the Instrument, provides a summarized report to the Senior Leader, and is available to discuss outcomes with the Senior Leader and the leader’s administrator.

Optional Coaching: the Senior Leader may decide to choose a leadership coach to help strengthen skills.

Biosketch

Marianne Di Pierro holds the Ph.D. in English from the University of South Florida and has served as both Director of the Graduate Center for Research and Retention, and Program Manager of Graduate Research and Retention, Graduate College, at WMU for the last 16 years. She currently serves as associate editor for the Journal for Quality and Participation and Quality Approaches in Education, both peer-reviewed journals sponsored by the American Society for Quality. She is also Chair, Major Publications; for the ASQ Health Care Division, implementing a publication process for clinicians and other health care professionals to take their research into publication via a monograph series that will be converted into books.

Office: 269. 387. 8249
Email: marianne.di pierro@wmich.edu