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Evaluating Educators

The Power of 360-Degree Feedback

Karen M. Dyer

By receiving feedback from multiple sources, educational leaders can reassess their skills, address their weaknesses, and become more valuable to their schools and districts.

Each day, educational leaders put forth extraordinary efforts to improve the quality of schools. Developing knowledge, skills, and attitudes requisite to success, however, is not easy for the administrator who is immersed in the day-to-day challenges of running a school or district. Consistently responding to various needs and demands (often in professional isolation), administrators seldom have the opportunity to gain insight and perspective on their actions or responses. Rarely do leaders receive specific, constructive feedback that enables them to determine whether they are behaving in ways that are consistent with their intentions or expectations.

This problem has educators looking to the business world for models, theories, practices, and ideas. One increasingly popular business practice that helps leaders challenge behavioral patterns that may get in the way of success is the 360-degree feedback process.

What Is It?

Known also as multirater feedback, multisource feedback, upward feedback, 360-degree feedback assessment, and full-circle evaluation, 360-degree feedback allows leaders to gather data about themselves from multiple sources in their circles of influence. The fundamental premise is that data gathered from multiple perspectives are more comprehensive and objective than data gathered from only one source. In an educational setting, the raters are usually superiors, peers, subordinates, parents, community members, and students. Raters can also include family, friends, and acquaintances. The individuals who are being rated also rate themselves, providing important data that should not be overlooked.

Educational leaders, like leaders in most organizations, get less and less realistic feedback as they move up in the hierarchy. Because of the limited opportunities for feedback, they tend to build on or enjoy perceived successes of the past. As a result, leaders may not recognize a need to change their behavior. The role of 360-degree feedback is to allow leaders to compare their own views of themselves with the views that others have of them. This comparison has the potential for leading them through an "unfreezing" process, where leaders are motivated to rethink their behavior and its impact on others (McCauley & Moxley, 1996).

Most 360-degree feedback instruments come in the form of surveys or questionnaires, consisting of several items that describe different kinds of competency, such as interpersonal skills, leadership, decision making, delegating, technical management skills, communication, and time management. Some 360-degree feedback instruments also include sections for open-ended responses.

The feedback is powerful because it gives school leaders opportunities to receive useful information about their behavior from identified sources. These data identify behaviors that leaders can work either to strengthen or to diminish. In addition, 360-degree feedback assists them in comparing their performance to stakeholder expectations. The school district can also measure behaviors and characteristics that relate to the values, beliefs, goals, and strategies of the organization.

The 360-degree feedback process can be a powerful tool, but only if it is used wisely and judiciously. Crucial to this process is trust. Once violated, trust is difficult to restore (Dyer & Carothers, 2000). Consequently, 360-degree feedback relies on some non-negotiable factors (Fleenor & Prince, 1997). Working together, the following factors contribute to the overall quality, effectiveness, and integrity of the process:

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Feedback is developmental, not evaluative.

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A coaching or mentoring session accompanies feedback.

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The development of a goal or action plan follows feedback.

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Feedback data belong to the receiver.

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The process is confidential.

Developmental Feedback

Whereas many educational systems may see multisource feedback as an alternative to traditional evaluations and performance appraisals, 360-degree feedback should not be the vehicle for either of these. Maxine Dalton (1996) posits that using 360-degree feedback for appraisal violates principles about learning, growth, and change. A district or an organization must have a culture that supports the use of feedback for development, not for evaluation.

Both leaders and raters may be reluctant to participate in the 360-degree feedback process if they know or even suspect that the data will be used for evaluative purposes. Evidence shows that raters tend to be more lenient when their ratings are associated with evaluation. They provide more honest, candid data when they are assured that the feedback is developmental.

Coaching

Coaching is an essential component of the 360-degree process, regardless of the feedback data. We have a tendency to think that if the feedback from the raters is all positive, coaching is not necessary. This is not the case. Face-to-face coaching, either one-on-one or in a group session, is mandatory.

The coach must establish a context for the feedback:

Feedback is data and the data are neutral. Data cannot make decisions about you. You can make decisions about the data. This is just one snapshot of you. It does not define you as a person. It is important that you put this snapshot alongside others to see what overarching patterns emerge. (Chappelow, 1998, pp. 48–49)

People make one of two common mistakes when they receive 360-degree feedback: They either accept or reject the information too quickly. The coach's role is to help the participant think deeply about the findings.

The feedback coach or mentor needs to be adept at helping the receiver understand the feedback, especially if raters have conflicting opinions. He or she must also be skilled in helping participants who feel hurt or resentful from any negative feedback. Hearing criticism, especially about our interpersonal skills, can be difficult and painful because it is often contrary to how we think of ourselves. The coach should take care not to psychoanalyze the motives behind the feedback.

Establishing Goals

The 360-degree feedback activity is not a stand-alone event. An outcome of any 360-degree feedback process is developing a plan of action. This should be not just an exercise in goal setting, but rather a blueprint for achieving and sustaining behavioral change. Several approaches help the participant focus on setting and achieving goals (Chappelow, 1998):

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Identify a developmental need and build on it.

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Identify a previously unrecognized strength and capitalize on it.

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Identify a developmental need and transform it to a midrange skill (that is, take action that leads to some degree of progress).

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Compensate for a weakness by owning it and adopting strategies to work around it.

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Address any lack of experience in an area by seeking new opportunities.

Goal setters are more likely to implement plans of action if the plans motivate, energize, and inspire them to be more effective in their current position and if the school or organization reaps some benefit as a result.

One of the roles of the coach or mentor is to help participants develop specific goals or action plans to address the developmental needs that emerge from the data. Coaches can also readminister plans after 18–24 months to allow a benchmarking of progress and continued leadership development.

Whose Data?

Districts and other groups that use any type of 360-degree feedback must pledge that the data belong to the person being rated. The decision to share or not to share the data must rest with the participant, not with the agent or agency that is commissioning the process. This may be difficult for a supervisor who wants to know the actual feedback that stakeholders give to a particular leader.

This commitment to confidentiality does not mean that those commissioning the process do not have a role. The 360-degree feedback process allows a supervisor to decide on the behaviors that will be assessed. The supervisor can communicate expectations that are specific to the district or organization. The data and the decision to act on the data, however, belong to the participant. Understandably, the supervisor may be interested in whether the participant is held accountable for the feedback. If the supervisor wants more specific assurances, then he or she should initiate an evaluative performance appraisal, not a 360-degree process.

Although receivers are not obliged to share data, data summaries, or any other information with the stakeholders who supplied the information, they may want to do so to demonstrate their appreciation for the feedback givers' willingness to provide data. Some might argue the validity of this ownership process. But as championed by John Jones and William Bearley,

The most important goal of multirater feedback is to inform and motivate feedback recipients to engage in self-directed action planning for improvement. It is the feedback process, not the measurement process, that generates the real payoffs. (Fleenor & Prince, 1997, p. 21)

Confidentiality

Raters must be protected through confidentiality. They have taken a risk in giving data, and they must be able to enjoy anonymity. The number of respondents should be great enough to form a comprehensive sample and to ensure confidentiality. The Center for Creative Leadership, a pioneer in using 360-degree feedback, states that feedback data should not be scored and given to the receiver unless there are at least three data sources per category. (The exception is if the boss or supervisor wants the receiver to know his or her specific responses.) For example, a principal may send the instrument to several teachers, support staff, site council members, students, other principals, and a supervisor—an assistant superintendent. When the surveys come back, the information can only be scored if a minimum of three teachers, three support staff, three site council members, three students, and three other principals are among the pool of respondents. If, within any category, there are only one or two responses, those surveys for that particular category are neither scored nor shared with the principal.

As much as possible, we must protect the confidentiality of the persons giving the feedback. Subordinates especially fear reprisal. Although their fear may be unfounded, it must be respected.

Successful Implementation

Before initiating a multisource feedback system, all constituents—receivers, raters, coaches or mentors, and those responsible for scoring the data—should meet. During this meeting, the participants should understand

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The purpose of the 360-degree assessment, the individual roles, and the value and importance of developmental feedback;

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The feedback instrument, which should be user-friendly;

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That top management supports this initiative, even if it means that the members of the governing board, the superintendent, and other central office administrators consent to going through the process first;

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How the feedback process links to larger organizational goals;

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Who "owns" the data; and

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That confidentiality is the linchpin to the integrity and success of the process.

Final Cautions

As the adage says, timing is crucial—so ascertain the best timing. We should not administer a 360-degree survey during highly stressful times or when ongoing activities within the school or district may get in the way of successful implementation.

As the 360-degree feedback process increases in popularity, we need to give special care to the issue of *survey fatigue*. A supervisor may end up completing surveys for each person in his or her group. The time commitment can be overwhelming, depending on the number of people participating in the study at the same time.

Where can schools get the surveys? Many 360-degree feedback surveys are available right off the shelf, whereas others can be custom-designed for a particular district or organization. When purchasing a tool, consider the content, length, supporting research, and cost. Whether the survey is purchased or designed, the questions need to be clear, understandable, and based on observable behaviors.

Although 360-degree feedback is growing in popularity in education circles, it can be harmful if not used correctly. Educators must pay attention to the relationships, rules, roles, and responsibilities associated with the process. Although multirater feedback is neither a recipe nor a panacea for improving schools, it does provide educational leaders with data to help them see, perceive, reflect, articulate, and analyze their own behavior on the basis of data from a full circle of constituents, including possibly their toughest critic—theirself.

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Karen M. Dyer is Manager, Education Sector, Center for Creative Leadership, Greensboro, NC; dyerk@leaders.ccl.org.

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