... get 360-degree coaching right

There are times when 360-degree feedback transforms personal performance. Similarly, there are times when the results are inconsequential. The difference is sometimes down to technicalities – usually questionnaire or report design. But another key differentiator is the strategies that coaches use. The most effective strategies are ruthlessly pragmatic and performance focused – which can be quite contrary to what many of us expect.

The following steps offer a guide to the strategic use of 360-degree appraisal. They build on two earlier “How to...” articles published in PM – on managing 360-degree feedback and linking 360 with appraisal – which can be viewed on PM’s website (see further info). Reading all three articles should provide a broad understanding of the main issues.
1 DON'T START AT THE BEGINNING
An individual's 360-degree feedback report might be the obvious place to start a coaching session, but it is the wrong place. Introducing the report at the beginning defines the session as merely helping to understand the report. And understanding is probably all you will achieve - people and performance will not change after the session.

Starting with the report, however anxious the individual may be to see it, conveys the wrong message about the session's purpose. Try to introduce the session as an opportunity to reflect on, and strengthen, personal performance. Explain that the report might be only a small part of a bigger performance discussion. Often it helps to move the report out of sight - once you've shown the individual you haven't forgotten it!

Likewise, do not give the person their feedback report prior to coaching - they will arrive at the session ready to ask about the report, not think about performance. Prior access also invites misinterpretations - much of the session can be spent addressing concerns that should never have arisen.

2 FOCUS ON PERFORMANCE
From the outset, ask about personal job performance. Ask the individual how their performance is measured, both by themselves and by the business. Ask about where they have succeeded in the past year, and what obstacles they have overcome. Ask about what has not gone well and what has been disappointing. This will provide you with invaluable background information, but will also allow the individual to clarify how they see themselves and their performance. If later parts of the session seem a struggle, it's often because insufficient time was given to thinking about performance at the outset.

3 DISCOVER THEIR ONE 'BIG GOAL'
Try asking what the person would love to achieve - both in the business and for the business. Or what would make the next six to 12 months a landmark in their job or career? Ask for something that's genuinely ambitious. If this "big goal" isn't frightening, it's probably not big enough. If there is more than one, then all goals are probably too modest. Look for a step change in performance. Focusing on one big goal gives the feedback greater relevance, and a real personal purpose for the coaching session. But expect people to take several minutes to think it through. Most have been so embroiled in day-to-day challenges that they have rarely stopped to consider what big, bold thing they might achieve.

4 LET THEM DO THE HARD WORK
Once the individual sees the feedback report, your job is to help them work out the important messages for themselves. If you find yourself explaining what the report means, you've failed. Much more personal change will occur if the person recognises only one or two messages for themselves, than if they hear about the many things you've noticed. Give them time to mull things over and draw their own conclusions. Resist the temptation to jump in and point out findings. Try to explain briefly the different sections of the report, then ask: "Which two or three things are you good at?" and "Which two or three are you less good at?" Limiting the person to only a few key conclusions encourages them to decide what's really important.

5 GET BEYOND COMPETENCIES
A person's abilities rarely fit neatly into the framework of competencies measured by a 360 questionnaire. Often an individual is strong on some aspects of a competency but weaker on others. While it would be nice if individuals fitted the organisation's competency framework, they never will. So, if you stick rigidly to the framework you'll be blinkered, and you'll miss a great deal. Rather than asking about stronger and weaker competencies, ask the person to look at the ratings for separate questions. In particular, look for differences between questions, and ask what common features or themes link stronger (and weaker) rated questions irrespective of their competencies. Similarly, encourage them to look for similar words or phrases and identify themes in what people have written in the answers to free text questions. These often explain or confirm findings from the ratings feedback, and may also be unrelated to the organisation's competencies.

6 CHANGE HOW THINGS GET DONE
Ask the person what, in the light of the report, they can do to achieve their big goal. Brainstorm at least 10 options - the best ideas are often the later ones. Options such as books, courses or learning from others or a mentor are all fine. But improving performance through personal development alone is usually a slow and uncertain process. In contrast, immediate, tangible performance improvements are often easily achieved by changing how things get done. So, ask about changes to processes, use of time, delegation, meetings, structures, jobs, relationships, information systems, and so on. Then invite the person to choose three options that are realistic, easy, quick and effective. Challenge choices that seem unlikely to provide concrete benefits in the short term. Choosing only three creates a focused and simple action plan.

7 ENGAGE THE MANAGER
Lastly, ask how the individual will share the feedback with their manager and win backing for their performance plan. It's a crucial question - few action plans succeed without management understanding and practical support. If the individual and manager have a poor relationship, then exploring how to engage the manager becomes even more important. It may need almost as much time as designing the action plan.

Key points
- The 360-degree feedback report is only a small part of a bigger performance discussion.
- Make sure enough time is given to personal job performance.
- Focusing on one big goal will give the session greater relevance.
- Don't spoon-feed the individual - more personal change will occur if they draw their own conclusions.
- Don't stick rigidly to the organisation's competency framework.
- Pin the person down to three actions that will help them achieve their big goal.
- Spend time working out how to engage their manager in the performance plan.

Further info
To read the first two articles in this series, visit:
» www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/manage360
» www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/link360

An A-Z listing of all of PM's "How to..." articles can be seen at » www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/howto
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