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## Custom Corporate Education Programs

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# Developing and Implementing a 360 Feedback Process

## *Best Practices*

by **Bill Hawkins**

Over the last 18 years we have worked with over 35 organizations developing and implementing 360 processes. Our database currently exceeds a million people. Our experience has been that assessment can be a powerful tool when coupled with feedback and coaching from a trained professional. There are, however, practical and legal issues to consider in maximizing the impact of the process.

### ***Practical Issues***

When a 360 is used as a performance appraisal tool, the whole nature of the assessment can (and frequently does) change. The raters will be less forthright, and less likely to provide honest feedback. Motives to get someone removed or to enhance someone's position can be consciously or unconsciously born out when raters know that their feedback will impact a boss or peer's review, pay, or advancement potential. Furthermore, knowing that a 360 review is coming up and that a bonus or pay increase can be impacted may also – consciously or unconsciously – motivate behavior in your leaders that is not necessarily in the best interest of the company (but which they may feel will get them higher ratings).

### ***Legal Issues***

If decisions ARE made on the basis of 360 feedback (i.e. promotion, demotion, salary treatment of any kind) the company is vulnerable in the event someone feels the results are unfair and they decide to take legal action. Unless the company has gone to the trouble and expense of validating the 360 instruments for every position in which it is being used, then defending a lawsuit would be costly and probably futile. It does not matter that the instrument has face validity, and is based on well-accepted leadership competencies. To be legitimately used to impact pay or promotion opportunities, the results on the 360 's must show a correlation with some type of outcome measure (productivity, turnover, etc.) and show that there is no bias (race, sex, national origin, etc.) This can be done, but is so costly and time consuming that few organizations choose to do it.

So with all these potential "land mines" why do 23 of the top 25 companies in Fortune Magazine's "Most Admired Companies in America" in 2005 use the process? Because it is probably the most effective tool available to senior management to align their

organizational expectations to individual goals and performance expectations of the people who must implement the plan.

## **What Works**

Although there are a number of good "generic" leadership models available, the vast majority of successful companies choose to develop a custom leadership profile. This profile is typically composed of two parts. The first part centers on the values or principles that are held near and dear to senior leadership of the organization. Johnson and Johnson calls these the "Credo"; American Express identifies them as their "Blue Box Values". This is the element that defines and reinforces the culture of the organization.

The second part identifies a set of core competences and leadership behaviors critical to the future success of the company. These competencies may not have been that important for success in the past. But as the leadership of the company looks to the future, it is clear that this set unique behaviors and competencies will be critical for success.

## **Holding People Accountable**

To hold people accountable for improving (which is the goal of a 360 process), we suggest using the 360 as a developmental tool – keeping the results from the survey confidential. This process virtually assures honest feedback from responders. The person receiving the 360 feedback (with the assistance of an outside coach) then picks one or two areas for personal growth and development. This may be an area of perceived weakness that needs improvement or a strength to be further developed and maximized. An action plan for improvement in this targeted area is developed and a customized mini-survey created to measure improvement over a specific period of time, usually 6 to 12 months.

It is reasonable that a person who has received the gift of a 360 developmental feedback be held accountable using this information productively. Sharing the mini-survey feedback with the person's manager is entirely appropriate and does not place the organization in a compromising situation from a legal standpoint. After all, the original 360 feedback information was confidential, the person chose his/her own areas on which to be measured, and selected the people to provide on-going feedback in the mini-survey.

If created thoughtfully and implemented effectively this process will align organizational goals to individual performance exceptions. It is an ideal tool to reinforce the corporate culture and communicate the set competences needed for the future success for everyone. It can also be a strong motivating factor for encouraging change in leadership behaviors in leaders of organizations that are undergoing major change.

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