



**10 things to do to
translate 360°
feedback into
performance gain**

About Us

Established in 1994, AM Azure Consulting has supported over 100 organisations in the design, implementation and evaluation of bespoke 360° feedback systems. Our generic products have been accessed by over 220 organisations across a range of industries in the public and corporate sectors.

Our perspective is that well designed and implemented processes, in combination with a commitment to evidence based practice, have substantial potential to accelerate leadership development, but that many organisations have failed to optimise the gains through flaws in design and failings in implementation.

This short article summarises our assessment of the future of 360° feedback practice that will shape the kind of change that drives sustainable organisational performance.



The context

Does 360° feedback result in the kind of self awareness that leads to behavioural change and in turn to improvements in leadership effectiveness? The guiding logic underpinning the design and implementation of feedback processes has been:

- feedback about our impact and effectiveness generates insight and a better understanding of what is working well or not so well for us
- this insight builds the kind of self awareness that sets priorities for our development
- these priorities are translated into an action plan for change
- this change results in improved ways of operating that enhance our leadership effectiveness to optimise our organisational contribution

Is this logic supported by the evidence of the research base? Here the answer is yes and no. Some individuals do show performance improvements. But others do not. And in a third of the studies they reviewed, one research group observed a decline in performance. Here feedback activity was making things worse.

We now know much about the opportunities and risks of 360° feedback: when it has most and least impact; who does and doesn't benefit from 360° feedback; and the factors that trigger change and those that result in defensive resistance.

This summary identifies 10 key themes for organisations - in the design, positioning, implementation and follow up of 360° feedback - to set a positive agenda for leadership change and improved business performance. And why if we ignore these dynamics, 360° feedback may be detrimental to organisational well being.



1. Know what 360° feedback can and can't do

The typical design process for 360° feedback begins with some kind of capability framework to map out the factors that are seen as critical to success. This framework of descriptors is then translated into a feedback questionnaire with a range of response and rating options for completion by the feedback population.

No doubt there is considerable variation in the quality of these frameworks and the robustness of questionnaire design. A badly designed model and feedback tool can only result in outcomes that confuse. But the problem for many feedback systems is more fundamental.



Although some aspects of leadership can be evaluated well through this approach, others can't. 360° feedback works well with the “nuts and bolts” of organisational life, the basics of interpersonal interaction and communication, and the practicalities of task management. 360° feedback processes don't however seem as well placed to identify the nuances of leadership activity or the attributes, motivations and intentions associated with leadership effectiveness.

The dynamics of working relationships - up, down and across the organisation - mean that different work colleagues are better positioned to provide feedback on some behaviours than others. This is to recognise that some leadership themes are more accurately evaluated by the line manager, others by peers, and a different set of activities by team members. If leadership is the “art of juggling” to respond to the different, and sometimes, competing expectations of work colleagues, a 360° feedback instrument that assumes line managers, peers and team members have an equally valid view of all leadership inputs and outputs will produce misleading findings.

A successful 360° feedback programme hinges on an appreciation of the relative strengths and shortcomings of the methodology to design a tool that asks the right questions of the right people.

2. Why less is more

If organisations design feedback instruments that often attempt to do too much, then the problem is reinforced by excessive questionnaire length.

When the 2009 3D Group benchmark study reviewed the common complaints about 360° feedback, the most frequent criticism was “too many surveys that take too long to complete”. The “length” problem has two consequences:

- **respondent fatigue** which ignores requests for feedback or is too rushed in completing the feedback questionnaire. In either event the quality of the feedback suffers.
- **report outputs that are cumbersome** for the end user. Given the permutations of analysis and presentational display, participants simply experience information overload and find it difficult to spot the key priorities within the feedback in their review of the results.

360° feedback of course needs sufficient coverage to provide credible insight into the dynamics of professional, management and leadership effectiveness. The challenge is to design a feedback process around the powerful questions which generate meaningful answers to help individuals identify the critical issues that matter to them, not “throw in the kitchen sink” and work out later what might be relevant.

This is partly about data crunching to determine the “high density” questions with most power to pinpoint the activities of leadership that can be improved and will make a positive business impact. It is also the deployment of technology to ensure feedback content can be targeted to the specific challenges the individual faces within their role rather than implement a “one size fits all” design.

The strategy of “less is more” ensures that feedback can be captured quickly and efficiently, generating high impact reports that focus on the key priorities for participants’ development.

3. Look through the eyes of the feedbacker

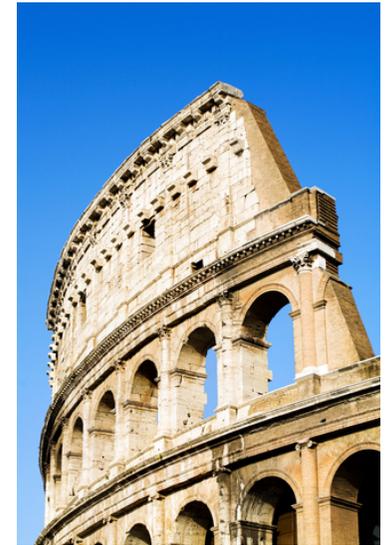
Largely for convenience, most feedback instruments present a standard set of questions to the feedback population. The individual participant, their line manager, peers, team members and other stakeholders complete a questionnaire along the lines of, for example, “she provides the team with regular feedback.”

This approach seems to ask the feedbacker to see the leadership world through the eyes of the participant in the evaluation of their effectiveness. A more sensible strategy may be to rewrite the questionnaire content to look through the eyes of the different work colleagues and focus on the issue: “what impact is this individual having on me?”

“She provides the team with regular feedback” might work for the participant’s line manager who can take a broader perspective, but “she provides **me** with regular feedback” may be more meaningful for team members.

This is to design feedback tools that start with the personal experience of those who will be asked to provide feedback and reframe the questions to personalise the activity and assess the direct impact of the participant on their colleagues.

360° feedback of course is about subjectivity of perception. But we can minimise subjectivity by anchoring the feedback questions within the perspective of those asked to provide feedback.



4. Build a culture of supportive challenge

The quality of 360° feedback hinges on the maturity of those asked to provide feedback, a maturity which requires feedbackers to combine challenge and support. Without challenge, the feedback process is little more than an exercise in emotional reassurance. Without support, feedback becomes a potentially destructive dynamic within the organisation.



Feedbackers should:

- **know what excellent performance looks like.** Individuals who have operated in an environment of low expectations based on “this is as good as it gets” will find it difficult to provide the evaluations that prompt participants to identify possibilities for improvement.
- **be able and willing to provide feedback.** Feedbackers need exposure to the individual across different situations to comment meaningfully on their impact and effectiveness. This also requires the candid expression of views to see 360° feedback as a way of establishing greater authenticity of working relationships.
- **invest personally in the process** to give meaningful feedback that goes beyond the “halo effect” of effectiveness to identify the specifics of what is and isn’t working well for the individual. This requires reflective time to offer insights that go beyond platitudes and clichés to suggest practical ways in which participants can optimise their performance.

Where the prevailing cultural ethos is one of either avoidance of the truth or a limited view of what is possible, it may be better to find ways of making it easier to have courageous conversations rather than initiate a 360° feedback programme.

5. Self insight is not enough

“Diagnose then adios” does not work. This is the tactic of conducting a 360° feedback process to issue the findings to participants in the expectation that the “truth shall set you free”. In this scenario, individuals are given their results in the hope that the feedback data will trigger self managed change.

Of course some insightful, open minded and motivated individuals will gain benefit from this approach, but the evidence indicates that self directed insight, in itself, rarely results in purposeful behavioural change. Some individuals will simply gain the reassurance from a largely positive endorsement, but in a busy world of competing priorities, simply carry on as usual. Other individuals will find the feedback confusing or disturbing, and file the exercise in that mental box “too difficult to think about”.

“Diagnose then adios” forgets the realities of human nature and how the ego responds to feedback. On the one hand, we are drawn to the kind of positive evidence that maintains high levels of self esteem. On the other, we are “soft wired” to scan the environment for potential threat to our personal identity.

The result: some individuals will be drawn to the positive messages, dismissing any challenge. Others will ignore the supportive feedback to focus only on the negative.

To move from the review of a feedback report to practical action planning, participants must negotiate three hurdles:

- **cognitive**: do I understand the key messages within the report or am I getting the wrong end of the stick?
- **emotional**: have I come to terms with my feelings about the feedback, or am I still caught up in emotions of hurt and anger?
- **motivational**: am I ready to plan out next steps, or do I remain stuck and unclear what I now need to do to make progress?

In the words of Ken Nowack, 360° feedback must be more than Enlighten. The process should also Encourage and Enable participants to build their skills and extend their behavioural repertoire.

This isn't to suggest that every 360° feedback process demands an extended programme of coaching activity. But it is to recommend that an infrastructure, supported by internal or external facilitation, is in place to help participants navigate from receipt of the report to build and maintain momentum for personal change.

6. Accept that not everyone will change

We know from the evidence base who is more or less likely to change as a result of 360° feedback. Some themes are obvious; individuals who are defensive or with a low locus of control are unlikely to display change and improvement.

Also key to responsiveness to change is the alignment between the individual's own evaluation and others' feedback. Over-estimators, those who rate themselves higher than others, show less improvement when they undergo a re-evaluation. It may be that the difference in perception proves too much of a threat to the ego, and individuals block the messages of the feedback. Alternatively, arrogance makes it difficult to display that humility which is responsive to change.

Under-estimators, whose own evaluations are lower than that of their colleagues, also face their own development challenge. Typically they focus on the negative results within the feedback and become caught up in the highlighted weaknesses rather than look for ways to build on the strengths that others have endorsed. This is self-critical leadership that in aiming for perfection finds it difficult to put in place the practical measures that enhance effectiveness.

It is true that 360° feedback processes can be a powerful way of signalling the hole that some leaders are digging. Here 360° feedback should operate as a wake up call for the individual to rethink operating priorities and to reevaluate their personal impact on others. But if the individual denies the hole they are in, the reality is that 360° feedback may not result in constructive change and improvement.

Under - performance of course needs to be managed, but invariably this requires an honest and authentic conversation about well known issues. 360° feedback seems best placed to enhance the performance of those individuals with a view of themselves that is largely in line with that of their colleagues, performing fairly well and looking for ways to optimise their effectiveness.

7. Focus on strengths but don't overlook the obvious gaps and risks

The philosophy of “identify and play to strengths” has many virtues, not the least it sets a positive tone about what is working well, and how this can be leveraged for greater effectiveness. The “First Break All The Rules” perspective is correct in the observation that it's easier to develop a talent from a “7 to a 9” than shift a “3 to a 5”. Leaders are more likely to move into that zone of exceptional performance by recognising and building on current strengths than attempt to fix any shortcomings.

And as Barbara Fredrickson's “broaden and build” model suggests, individuals are more likely to widen their attention span, willing to explore opportunities and develop new behavioural repertoires when they experience positive emotions. Individuals who feel negative about the findings from the 360° exercise will not be responsive to change and development.

The last few years has seen something of a backlash against the dominance of the “play to strengths” philosophy of development. Specifically it has resulted in:

- a leadership complacency that stays within the comfort zone and lacks the **versatility** to lead in an uncertain world
- a generation of leaders without the judgement and **wisdom** to make sense of the fuzziness of leadership life
- a leadership group which is vulnerable to challenge and adversity, lacking the **resilience** to adapt and redeploy its efforts to changing circumstances
- a **narrowness** of leadership outlook and homogeneity at senior levels which is holding back an agenda of greater diversity

The shrewd application of 360° feedback addresses the context in which individuals operate. This is about reviewing the challenges they face and how best to optimise existing strengths. It is also evaluating the risk of relying on strengths that are no longer relevant and addressing any gaps that might represent significant constraints to effectiveness.

For leaders, in roles of ambiguity and uncertainty that require judgement, wisdom and versatility, a balanced development agenda will avoid that lop-sided outlook that runs the risk of derailment.

8. Line management matters - equip them for their role

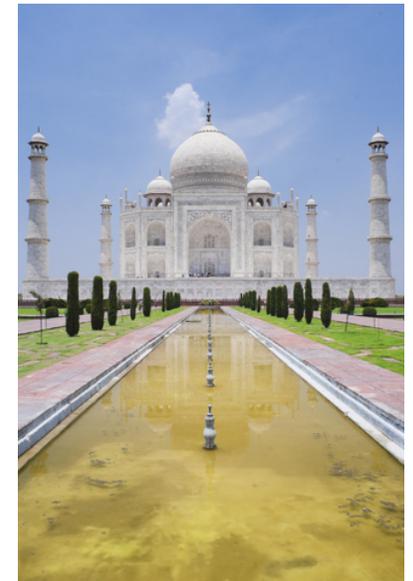
Around two thirds of individuals are dissatisfied with the amount of time their line manager spends on their development. Typically performance reviews are conducted as a rushed formality, and discussions about career development are awkward and unsatisfactory.

In our consulting experience, one of the big spin off gains of a 360° feedback exercise is the trigger for individuals to have an authentic conversation with their line manager, perhaps for the first time in their working relationship.

It is true that a mismatch of perceptions (between the line manager and the individual, or between the line manager and other work colleagues) can make this a difficult encounter. Nonetheless it provides an opportunity to clarify expectations and agree a way forward. At best this is a refreshingly frank conversation about assumptions and priorities that results in a new and better way of working together. At worst it opens up a “can of worms” that can only further weaken a fragile relationship.

Some individuals will of course seize the initiative for proactive development, despite their line manager. For the most part, however, individuals will need the support and backing of their manager to help create the time and space to extend their skill sets and deepen their experience base.

In planning a programme of 360° feedback it is best not to assume that all line managers are either willing or able to play this support role in the exercise. Put in place the practical measures that ensure line managers understood the importance of their role in the follow through and are skilled to manage the range of different conversations they may face.



9. Build a follow up review with the team

If 360° feedback can help clarify expectations between the individual participant and their line manager and put in place commitments to support development, then it is team members who have an even more important role in translating feedback into feedforward.

As Marshall Goldsmith summarises from the research: “time and time again, one variable emerged as central to the achievement of positive long-term change; the participants’ ongoing interaction and follow up with colleagues.”

Participants who share a headline summary of the 360° feedback results with their direct reports, invite ideas for development and follow up the discussion with progress updates, are more likely to show “striking improvements”.

No doubt for some individuals this can be a tough exercise, particularly if the feedback incorporates some challenging messages from their direct reports. But conducted with courage, honesty and humility, this process ensures that the feedback goes beyond a report with an interesting set of findings to an active set of priorities for the individual and their leadership of the team.

Peter Drucker once said, “the best way to develop yourself is to develop others.”

When participants in a 360° feedback programme share and review their personal results with their direct reports, and link their own personal development to those of their team members, they not only progress as leaders, they build the capability of their team.



10. Evaluate to assess impact and keep improving

Like many other initiatives in the arena of professional and leadership development, the process begins well with positive feedback from participants. And 360° feedback is largely well received by the end users. It is seen as a credible and relevant perspective to provide a reality check on impact and valuable in identifying how to improve performance. So far so good.

Twelve months later, someone asks the question: “what difference did this programme make?”



If the 360° feedback process has triggered the kind of change that results in improvements in effectiveness, how is this played out in the organisational indicators of:

- higher levels of employee engagement
- speed and responsiveness of implementation
- succession coverage and the strength of the talent pipeline
- improved customer satisfaction scores
- business performance metrics

“When participants know that surveys or other means of measuring programme effectiveness are slated to occur 3 - 15 months from the date of the programme, a higher level of commitment is created among them.”

No doubt there are challenges in the methodology to evaluate impact. Pinpointing the contribution that 360° feedback has made to business performance is difficult given the other typical changes in organisational practice over any period of time.

But to begin asking the questions is to introduce an accountability that establishes a discipline for participants: what for you have been the gains of greater personal effectiveness? And for the organisation, what outcomes indicate that this activity made a positive difference?

Conclusions

360° feedback remains a highly popular activity in professional and leadership development, and increasingly, as a complement to performance development reviews. End user satisfaction continues to be positive.

However it is clear that much practice - in design, process implementation, and in the follow through and evaluation has failed to optimise the potential gains in triggering the kind of change and improvement that results in higher levels of organisational performance. The future of 360° feedback lies in smarter models of design, attention to the infrastructure that supports implementation, and a willingness to track activity and evaluate the organisational outcomes.



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4. **build a culture of supportive challenge**
5. **self insight is not enough**
6. **accept that not everyone will change**
7. **focus on strengths but don't overlook the obvious gaps and risks**
8. **line management matters - equip them for their role**
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AM Azure Consulting

Established in 1994, AM Azure Consulting works with a broad portfolio of clients – in the UK and internationally - in the design and implementation of online services in recruitment and selection; management assessment, development and career management; online leadership tool kits, 360° feedback; performance management and talent and succession management.

If you are interested in our approach to talent management, our consulting expertise, assessment tools and talent planning software:

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We:

- summarise complexity to provide solutions that are pragmatic and build and maintain momentum for our clients.
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- cut to the chase to focus on the distinctive challenges of our clients. We enjoy the innovation that results from our clients with ideas and we help translate them into practical applications.
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