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Performance Appraisals

CREATING CHAMPIONS FOR 360 DEGREE FEEDBACK

Here's how to construct a Stakeholder Map to identify key people and their degree of commitment for your feedback initiative.

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MANY A HUMAN resource manager has been delighted by the enthusiasm within the HRD department for the idea of implementing a 360 feedback program, only to discover that those outside HRD in the organization were groaning at the prospect. Staff and line managers in particular tend to think of 360 feedback as too touchy-feely and as another HRD brainchild that will waste their valuable time and budgets without producing any noticeable results.

Unfortunately, such prophecies tend to be self-fulfilling: If you don't have the support of line and staff people, it's likely that any 360 program will fail. So, how do you make sure that doesn't happen in your organization and that you win the support of those people with their eyes fixed firmly on the bottom line? How do you make champions out of skeptics?

Essentially, there are three things you need to do. One, you have to address business concerns instead of presenting a 360 program in terms of psychological benefits or value for individual growth. Two, you have to solicit managers' input on the program's goals. Make sure it is their program and not just HRD's. Three, you will want to involve them in the planning and implementation.

Addressing their concerns shows how the feedback program can help solve a specific business problem or achieve a specific business goal. To persuade them, there are three kinds of necessary preparation. First, you must have a sound grasp of what kind of business problem or need the organization is facing. You must also have a lot of information at your fingertips about 360 feedback and be able to relate it to the business need or problem—ideally, by discussing how a similar issue was addressed successfully through the use of 360 feedback. And you must be able to anticipate and answer a broad range of likely questions on 360 feedback.

The final type of preparation relates to each decision maker's position on the subject of 360 feedback. Is he or she likely to be receptive to the idea? If not, what might be causing the lack of enthusiasm?

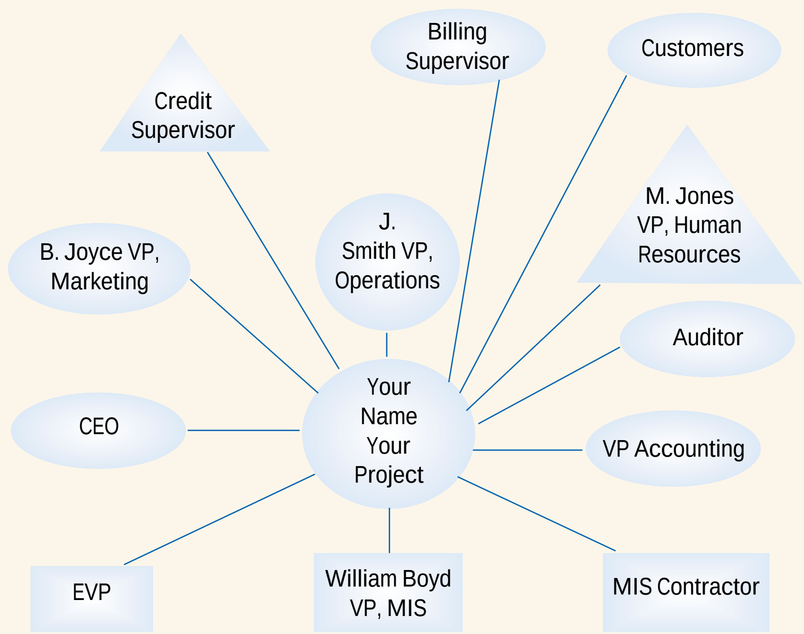
Before you can create an effective plan for turning key people into champions for your proposal, you will need to decide exactly whose support is vital and try to anticipate their reactions. Once you're clear on those points, you are ready to take the next steps.

Identifying key people

The easiest way to identify the key decision makers and stakeholders is to construct a Stakeholder Map. You can do that alone, but you will get better results if you enlist colleagues involved in the 360 feedback project.

Step 1: Make a list. List all of the people who need to approve decisions. Then, list all of the individuals and groups that might benefit, be affected negatively, or be inconvenienced. Don't overlook members of your own team, and look for hidden stakeholders—people who may have personal reasons for not wanting this initiative.

A Stakeholder Map



Step 2: Rate the stakeholders. Categorize the decision makers and stakeholders you identified in step 1 as positive or highly committed (+), neutral or willing to comply but not likely to be active advocates (0), negative or likely to resist and oppose (-), or don't know (?). Try to put yourself in each stakeholder's shoes to view the initiative from his or her perspective.

Step 3: Draw a map. Next, draw a Stakeholder Map similar to the one in the figure. Put circles around the stakeholders likely to support your effort, triangles around stakeholders likely to comply but not support actively, squares around stakeholders likely to resist, and nothing around stakeholders you can't categorize until you collect more information. Put the most important stakeholders—those with the most influence over your success or failure—close to the center of the map. Continue to collect the information you need to complete the map, and update it as you learn more about your stakeholders.

Your next task is to analyze the stakeholders. As a result of your mapping activity, you identified all of the important stakeholders and categorized them according to how they are likely to react to your proposal. Before you develop a plan for influencing them, it's important to know what each stakeholder stands to gain or lose if your program is implemented.

Every stakeholder, whether an individual or a group, will view your proposed program both from an organizational and a personal perspective. To better anticipate how they will react, answer these questions from each stakeholder's point of view: Does this project serve the interests of my work unit (the part of the organization with which I identify most closely)? How might it affect me personally?

Overcoming resistance

Now that you have identified key stakeholders and the degree of support you can expect, you need to focus on the stakeholders you believe will resist the idea of using 360 feedback and those whose commitment is required but from whom you can expect only compliance. Begin by clarifying the possible reasons for their lack of commitment.

The purpose isn't made clear. When people don't understand fully how multisource feedback will be used, the vacuum is usually filled by anxiety, rumors, and suspicion. What exactly is the business problem or opportunity that the feedback proposal is trying to address? Effective communication is the most powerful tool for eliminating this type of resistance and for building support. Whether your 360 feedback process is a major organizational intervention or a modest effort involving just a few people, you can never communicate too much or too often.

When one of our clients decided to use 360 feedback as part of a leadership development and culture change initiative, the CEO held a series of meetings with senior people across the organization to explain why the project was important and what the expected benefits were. In addition, a senior manager kicked off each session, answered questions about the business's performance, and discussed why the 360 feedback effort was necessary and timely. After those meetings, the level of enthusiasm for the project rose across the board.

People aren't involved in the planning. When stakeholders feel that their input hasn't been taken into account in the planning, they're less likely to be supportive. It's human nature for people to support what they help create. But apart from that issue, people want to be sure that their issues and needs will be addressed before they're willing to commit to the program.

The most straightforward way to address that issue is to treat decision makers and other stakeholders as clients or customers. That means taking time to understand their needs and involving them from the earliest stages of the decision-making process. We suggest getting all of the stakeholders involved in clarifying the business problem or need, identifying the behaviors on which to give feedback, and deciding which method will be used to collect data. You should also get their ideas on how to overcome any obstacles they believe might stand in the way of successful implementation. A task force or temporary committee is an effective vehicle for ensuring the involvement of key individuals and building their consensus.

For example, a major bank used a task force to create a coalition of support and to ensure that the needs of key people were always at the forefront of discussions and planning. At the earliest stages of the project, the senior vice president of human resources, who had been placed in charge of the 360 feedback effort, assembled 20 of the most competent and respected managers in the company. She made sure that each function and line of business was represented, as well as field employees. The task force was involved in determining the project's goals, identifying competencies for effective job performance, selecting suppliers to support the task force's work, and developing and monitoring implementation plans. The high degree of participation saved time and helped move the project along smoothly and on schedule. Because problems and concerns were identified and resolved early, there were fewer false starts and less need to revisit decisions and resell ideas.

People have negative perceptions. If previous efforts to use 360 feedback in the organization have had a negative effect, you can expect a new initiative to meet some sturdy resistance. Your task will be harder if, for example, the feedback was used inappropriately or a stakeholder received negative feedback without any support or facilitation to smooth his or her understanding—or if a stakeholder contributed honest feedback and was punished for it.

First, you must clarify the cause of a stakeholder's negative perception. Is it based on firsthand experience? Or is it a vague impression, perhaps caused by a colleague's account? If it's the former, you can point to current approaches for preventing the problems the stakeholder experienced, and you can ask for further suggestions. If the negative perception stems from a general impression not based on personal experience, the best way to change the person's mind is to let him or her experience the process in a way that is perceived to be risk-free.

When we first encountered resistance among members of a task force that was helping plan the implementation of a 360 feedback process in a large chemicals company, we became confused. We had been working with them for several weeks to identify the key behaviors to measure, and they seemed enthusiastic and committed. But as we approached the project phase of actually using feedback, they raised questions about the potential negative effect on recipients' morale and motivation. They also wondered whether people are always able to complete questionnaires honestly and accurately. As the discussion continued, it dawned on us that a lack of firsthand experience was at the root of their concerns. We found that only two of the group's 15 members had ever received or provided 360 feedback. Our solution was to make the task force a pilot group. Once the members experienced the process themselves, their anxiety and suspicion gave way to wholehearted support.

Concerns about the feedback's use. Selling the idea of using 360 feedback for appraisal or compensation can be more difficult than proposing its use for development purposes only. Stakeholders may not want to be held accountable for any potential problems that could arise as a result of improperly used feedback.

We recommend that, to start with, 360 feedback be used for development only, especially if it is the organization's first experience. It's less risky because people have more control of the data and how it's used. A development-only approach also gives people experience using multisource feedback and helps them understand how it can contribute to other HR management systems. If, however, the feedback is intended for use in appraisal and compensation systems, the focus of your conversation with resisters should be on the steps you have taken to ensure the data's integrity and accuracy.

Once you have determined each stakeholder's most likely cause of resistance, you are ready to approach the resisters identified on your Stakeholder Map. The box describes the common causes of resistance and recommended actions.

Talking it through

Before you approach the stakeholders to discuss their resistance, you should have a plan. You should

Common Causes of Resistance

Here are some typical reasons people resist 360 feedback.

- The purpose of the feedback isn't made clear.
- Stakeholders aren't involved in the planning.
- Stakeholders have negative perceptions about 360 feedback.
- Stakeholders are concerned about how the feedback will be used.

Here are some recommended actions.

- Hold individual informal discussions with stakeholders to review the reasons for the feedback process and to answer any questions.
- Link feedback to the attainment of organizational goals while explaining how people will benefit personally.
- Ask stakeholders to describe situations in their units in which 360 feedback would add value.
- Encourage their participation. Present your implementation plan as tentative. Ask for their input on how to make it effective.
- Form a task force made up of credible people who represent various work units.
- Make clear why and how this effort will be different. Solicit suggestions on how the problems people experienced in the past can be avoided.
- Get stakeholders to experience the feedback process as it will be used in your organization. Give them the chance to evaluate it.
- Begin by using 360 feedback for development only.
- Describe how the accuracy of the data and the integrity of the process will be assured.
- Give people control over their feedback.

know exactly what you hope to achieve. For instance, how will you know when you have gained their commitment? What exactly do you want them to do? Once you have made those determinations, flesh out your plan using these guidelines:

- Consider what you want the stakeholder to do—such as, lend his or her name to the effort, champion actively, or provide funding?
- Consider the stakeholder's goals, values, and needs.
- Consider what concerns he or she might have that would cause resistance.
- Determine what actions can address those concerns.
- Clarify the benefits of the proposal—both organizational and personal.
- Consider the stakeholder's possible objections. How will you respond?
- Determine the type of approach that is likely to work best with this person—fact-based, value-based, participative, or collaborative?
- Decide how you will begin the conversation. What will be your opening remarks?
- Think about what might make the conversation easy, or difficult. What can you do to lessen the difficulty?

As you put your plan into action, you can increase the likelihood of success if you use your past experiences with the stakeholder to identify the potentially most effective approach. You should anticipate his or her objections and be prepared to answer any questions or concerns with well-thought-out responses. In addition, listen carefully. Show that you are listening by paraphrasing what he or she says and then address those issues directly. And be flexible. Be willing to address problems and incorporate others' suggestions and concerns into your planning.

When you first begin analyzing the situation and determining what it will take to create champions for your 360 feedback program, you may want to keep questions and checklists close at hand. You may find it useful to put your plan on paper. But as you gain more experience in winning over people, you'll find that you internalize the process until it's almost second nature. Instead of mapping out your discussions in laborious detail, you'll be able to plan them while driving your car or even in mid-discussion. You may also find that the general techniques described here are helpful in a broad range of situations—both in and outside of the workplace. ■

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