

# SDR

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## 360 Feedback – once again the research is useful!

ALMOST A DECADE AGO *Selection and Development Review* published ‘360 Feedback – for once the research is useful’ (Goodge and Burr 1999). It reviewed the research on 360 Feedback, and found it surprisingly helpful to practitioners. Very briefly, Goodge and Burr concluded...

- 360 often has positive outcomes, and the benefits are sustained. However, some 360 interventions adversely affect people and performance.
- Below average performers benefit most from 360, but the small percentage of worst performers don’t improve.
- The key things to get right are clear/relevant questions, feedback from eight or more people, and ensuring some critical feedback.
- Feedback reports should be simple and visual<sup>2</sup> with few, if any, averages or graphs<sup>3</sup>. ‘Expert’ comments on reports don’t help - individuals need to draw their own conclusions.

Nothing in the more recent research conflicts with those conclusions; some of the new research provides further support for them. In particular, there is a growing body of evidence for 360’s positive impact (see Walker & Smither, 1999) however there are some important new things to think about.

Broadly, the current research addresses three areas: self-awareness, performance improvement, and what might be described as ‘noise’ in 360 Feedback.

### Self-awareness

In the research, self-awareness is often measured by the difference between the ratings given for an individual and his/her own ratings. If a person rates him/herself similarly to the ratings given by others he/she is considered to be more self-aware. It’s a crude measure, but an important one.

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Peter Goodge & Jane Coomber<sup>1</sup>

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Self-awareness may influence performance. Fletcher’s (1997) helpful review of self-awareness research concluded ‘Some evidence suggests that greater self-awareness... is linked to... higher performance’. More recent research has confirmed that those with greatest self-awareness tend to be the strongest performers (Ostroff et al., 2004).

Low self-awareness might result in an individual rating his/herself more favourably than others do – so-called ‘overrating’. Or, rating him/herself more critically than others – ‘under-rating’. It’s an important distinction, because...

- Extreme overrating might be associated with poor performance (Atkins & Wood, 2002).
- It may be that those who overrate themselves benefit more from 360 Feedback. Johnson & Ferstl (1999) found that 360 improved over-raters’ self-awareness – their self-assessment became more modest whilst the ratings given by others became more favourable.
- Over-raters tend to be particular kinds of people: male, older, better paid, confident and innovative (Ostoff et al., 2004; Warr & Ainsworth, 1999).

Over-rating seems specific to some competencies. An individual who overrates him/herself tends to misjudge his/her interpersonal skills, e.g. leadership, sensitivity. Technical competencies do not seem to be over-rated (Warr & Ainsworth, 1999).

It is probable that good self-awareness enables a person to work with others more effectively. Accurate perceptions of how others see you helps anticipate their reactions to your ideas and decisions and judge how you might best influence

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<sup>1</sup> Our thanks to Senate House and Birkbeck libraries for their help during the development of this article.

<sup>2</sup> A simple traffic-light format with critical ratings in red and favourable ratings in green works well. There is an example at [www.simply360.co.uk/samplerreport.pdf](http://www.simply360.co.uk/samplerreport.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> The research suggests that averages for competencies and for respondent types (e.g. direct reports) have no psychometric validity, but may hide important differences and patterns.

them. There is also anecdotal evidence - the very poor performers we coach are often clumsy with people and decisions precisely because they have mistaken views about others' perceptions of them.

### **Performance improvement**

A growing body of evidence suggests that 360 feedback works well if...

- The feedback itself suggests personal change is needed.

Unsurprisingly, individuals who respond negatively or angrily to critical feedback don't improve (Atwater & Brett 2006; Brett & Atwater 2001). However, without some differences between a person's view of him/herself and the views of others there is no reason for them to change. Johnson and Ferstl (1999) concluded that managers 'improve their performance to a greater extent the more their self-ratings exceed their subordinate ratings'.

- The individual and his/her organisation values feedback and development.

Mauer et al. (2002) found that individuals who believed they could improve tended to value 360 feedback and engage in personal development. Warr and Ainsworth (1999) concluded '360 feedback is likely to be most effective when it is part of a corporate culture that supports ... its aims and procedures'.

- There is practical support for understanding and using feedback.

In a five-year study, Walker and Smither (1999) found that 'managers who held feedback sessions to discuss their upward feedback with direct reports, improved more than other managers.' And, they found 'managers improve more in years when they hold feedback meetings than in years when they do not.' Seifert et al. (2003) report significant behaviour change when 360 feedback was part of a facilitated workshop, but no change when managers just received their feedback report. A key aspect of support seems to be the provision of opportunities for individuals to manage and interpret things for themselves. Keeping and Levy (1998) found that attitudes to 360 were significantly affected by the extent to which individuals could express their opinions and interpretations.

Smither et al.'s (2005) impressive meta-analysis of 360's impact drew similar conclusions about the importance of feedback suggesting change, a positive development culture and practical support.

Interestingly, Goodge (1995) found very similar things to be important with development centres. Centres that provided clear, critical feedback, helpful coaching, and post-centre support had significantly better outcomes. Perhaps there's a bigger message here?

### **Noise**

The 360 feedback a person receives doesn't just depend on his/her skills and abilities; many other factors influence the ratings. In particular, who gives the ratings matters. For example, Ostroff et al. (2004) found that women gave more favourable ratings; hence more women completing questionnaires for an individual meant the more favourable feedback. And, Murphy et al. (2004) showed that a rater's reason for giving feedback influenced his/her ratings even when observing the same performance.

In most 360 feedback there is probably a great deal of noise. Perhaps more noise than anything else. Greguras et al. (2003) found 'the combined rater and rater-by-ratee interaction effects and the residue effects were substantially larger than the person effect'. In plain language, a person's feedback was more to do with who completes questionnaires than the person's abilities.

However, noise can be reduced. Fletcher et al. (1998) demonstrated that good questionnaire design transformed the psychometric properties of a 360 questionnaire, which improved the quality of feedback.

### **Implications for practice**

What can we add to Goodge and Burr's recommendations of a decade ago? The new research suggests three additional implications for practice...

- Because 360 only works if it's supported, organisations need to plan briefings, coaching, workshops and development resources from the outset. 360 needs to be part of a bigger, integrated project, not seen as a stand-alone tool. With limited budgets and resources it might be more cost-effective to limit 360 feedback to smaller, targeted groups of managers with whom it is done without cutting corners.

It's very naïve to buy 360 software, make it available to hundreds of managers, and offer minimal support. Yet, a worrying number of organisations seem to do exactly that.

- Individuals need to own and influence their 360 feedback. In practice that might mean ...
  - Feedback on the competencies personally important to the individual, not a set completely prescribed by HR.
  - The individual chooses who completes questionnaires for him/her, not a predetermined sample of direct reports, colleagues, etc. We suggest individuals ask their key 'customers' to complete questionnaires, and involve their manager when making those choices.
  - A simple feedback report that enables individuals to interpret feedback easily themselves. Complex reports are obstacles to understanding and ownership. If an individual can't interpret his/her report for themselves in five or 10 minutes we think it's too complicated.
  - A coaching process that focuses upon personal goals, and offers a variety of practical, relevant ways of improving performance.
  - The individual's manager closely involved from beginning to end. Managers also need to own and influence their peoples' feedback.
- Good questionnaire design to reduce 360's noise. The rules of good design are simple and have been around for decades, but many 360 questionnaires seem to disregard them. Very briefly, the rules are plain-English, one specific, observable behaviour per question, and explicit performance standards.

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### Correspondence

**Peter Goodge** and **Jane Coomber** are partners with Simply360.

E-mail: peter.goodge@simply360.co.uk and jane.coomber@simply360.co.uk

This article is part of Simply360's free online 360 Handbook – see [www.simply360.co.uk/handbook](http://www.simply360.co.uk/handbook)

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