Solution Focused 360° Feedback in Organisations

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Today many companies use 360 degree feedback systems to help their managers and leaders to develop. Most often these systems consist of predetermined questions around the leadership values that the organization has identified as part of a strategic leadership culture initiative. These questions are then put into an online system. Each leader in the organization can send this questionnaire to informants of their choice: their bosses, their peers, their direct reports or even customers. Each of the informants answers the questions by checking a box between "agree completely" and "disagree". In most systems there is even room for one or two verbal comments. What I found working with these systems is that most managers immediately go to the verbal comments and ignore the average numbers and the range. And, indeed, it is very hard to say what exactly it means when somebody slightly disagrees with the statement "Mr. Y is a visionary leader". It is actually even harder for the recipient of the 360 degrees feedback

to find out what to do to become a more visionary leader or even to know whether this is what people want from him. Open Space Technology resulted from the observation that "the most important conversations happen in the coffee break". My SF 360 Feedback is derived from a similar observation: "Talking about solutions helps". So whenever you would like to help an organization create better leaders in their company, SF 360 Feedback is a good option to choose.

How it works:

First step:

You have an individual meeting with the leader who would like to get better at what she does. The conversation is mainly a goal setting conversation. You ask questions like:

- If this 360 degrees feedback process is useful for you what will be different afterwards?
- On a scale of 0-10, where are you now with regard to these goals? (or several scales)
- What tells you it is already at X and not at 0?
- What could be a next step that you know about already?
- What would you like to know about how others perceive you? What are you curious about?

- Who would be good people to call? (In my experience it is good to encourage the reader to be bold and look for a good mix of people who they get along with well and people who are more critical. It is also good to get the feedback of the direct superior.)

Second step:

You ask the leader to politely ask for 15 minutes of each informant's time and supply you with a list of phone numbers and e-mail addresses of the people you should call. Set up appointments for telephone conversations with each of the informants. On a practical level it makes sense to do these calls from your computer with a headset phone so you can type while the informants are giving their answers. If you are not a quick typer, you can also record the conversations, but then he will obviously need the informant's permissions. I have very good experience with quickly typing the main points of each informant and then rereading what I wrote down to them. It seems like the fact that I use the informants' language in my summaries built a lot of trust in me and the process.

Third step:

When you are having the phone conversations with the individual informants, introduce yourself, quickly explain that the conversation is confidential and that you will only supply an anonymized report to the leader XY and that she will not know who said what.

In the phone conversations you can ask questions like:

- On a scale of 0-10, where 10 is optimal collaboration and 0 the opposite – where are you now?

- What does leader XY do to make it possible that it is not 0?
- What should leader XY definitely continue doing?
- What would X+1 look like? How would you notice that leader XY is moving up a step?
- What is some of your well-intentioned advice for leader XY?
- Is there anything that I forgot to ask but that is important for leader XY to know?

While the informants are answering, you write down the relevant information. When an informant is very general, e.g. "leader XY is not visionary enough", you persistently ask for concrete information: "how would you notice that she is more visionary?" or "what would be the first tiny sign that she is becoming more visionary"

Fourth step:

You find a way to communicate the gathered information to the recipient of the 360 degrees feedback. I usually write a report in which I summarize what people said and take care to include those things that leaders should continue doing and concrete ideas for what leader might change to become even more effective. We then work on the identified topics in coaching sessions – usually not many coaching sessions are necessary because the leader has a lot of concrete suggestions that she can try out just by reading the report. Most often there are 2 more sessions in about 6 weeks time.

Effects:

When you compare the SF 360 Feedback with the usual online 360 degrees products, the SF 360 Feedback compares favorably:

Traditional 360 Feedback computer based	SF 360 Feedback
Expensive setup of the questionnaire	No set-up cost – cheap pilot sessions are possible.
15 minutes per informant necessary to fill in partially irrelevant questions (not all questions will be applicable for everyone)	15 minutes per informant necessary – only relevant information is elicited
Sometimes low quality of the answers	High quality answers are ensured
Sometime not apparent what to do with the answers	Answers provide meaningful suggestions
Individual strengths are considered only in a generalized way	Individual strengths and good behaviors are recognized and strengthened
Little positive influence of answering the questionnaire on the informants (except, maybe, reinforcement of the company values in a very general way)	Providing a paradigm for giving feedback and continuing improvement based on individual strengths and improvement possibilities. People find out how to talk about it when they need someone to change something – and also find out how good it is to mention the positive points

Extension:

If you work with several coaches in the same organization it makes sense to provide the company with the opportunity to listen to a "resource gossip" and "reflecting team" where the coaches sit together and talk about what goes well in the company and what they have heard that might benefit from some attention. While the coaches are talking, the leaders of the organization listen and then talk about what they have heard and what they want to keep doing and what they would like to try doing a bit differently as a group.