

360° Feedback

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“It’s hard to imagine the company without it”

You may have already guessed that 360° Feedback is one of the Group’s flagship ‘new culture’ priorities. An aid to personal development, vital to the creation of an open and honest environment - it’s clearly an important lever for change. But how does it actually work? Well in New Zealand, since introducing 360° Feedback, they’ve achieved a 50 per cent improvement in the effectiveness of their managers - as measured by the staff. Here, Graeme Craig, IT & corporate services director, describes how it all works.

Our **managing** director in New Zealand, Alan Bradley, says upwards feedback and the accompanying management development programme are among the most successful strategies we’ve ever introduced. A senior management colleague describes them as “the best thing that has happened to me in my career”.

We decided to use 360° Feedback in 1995, after a survey found that staff saw their managers as task focused: they wanted them to have a greater orientation towards the ‘people’ aspects of management. To follow up on this, we asked consultant Dave Burton of Potential Development to lead a series of focus groups.

What came through was that people wanted more from their leaders. Yet when we tried to find out what that ‘more’ was, it turned out to be different for everybody. It became clear that the usual training course would not suffice and that a more tailored programme for each individual would be more beneficial.

We chose 360° Feedback, precisely because it is not a training course, but is based on the reality of each individual’s situation. The results are so pleasing that we now have 80 of our managers and supervisors involved in the programme -which means virtually all 458 staff have the opportunity to provide feedback.

At team debriefings, facilitated by Dave Burton, staff speak to their managers about the results of the feedback. Here, the focus is on the particular behaviours which staff would like to see the manager stop, start or continue. These debriefs typically last two to three hours. Similar sessions are held with managers’ associates. The debriefs are a key to the success of the feedback process.

“I felt a sense of excitement at seeing a group of people tackle real issues that were important to them. The group were able to define the issues for themselves and make sound suggestions for change in a way that supported and included their manager,” said an outsider who observed a recent debrief. “It was an incredibly honest process. Staff were talking to their manager and being listened to. Perhaps the most important thing was that the group knew what the problems were and what solutions needed to be implemented to solve them. ”

For Alan Bradley, 360° Feedback has played a vital part in improving managerial behaviour at Royal & SunAlliance. “It’s hard now to imagine the company without it. While the process will undoubtedly evolve, I’m sure it will continue to be an essential ingredient in helping our managers, me included, meet the expectations of our staff.” For Dave Burton, the company’s attitude is a clue to the effectiveness of the feedback process. “The commitment to the process at Royal & SunAlliance is higher than I’ve ever seen for any traditional training”, he said.

Independent facilitation critical

Human resources director in New Zealand, Warwick Harvey says high quality independent facilitation is essential for successful feedback.

For 360° Feedback to work, you have to expect high levels of honesty from staff and be willing to address the issues that emerge. For us in New Zealand, because the process is facilitated by a neutral person, the energy is used constructively and staff are in a strong position to define the issues, consequences and ‘solutions’.

The neutrality of the facilitator is essential to maintain credibility. Because Dave Burton is independent of the company, he’s removed from political or vested interests. This is essential to gain and keep the confidence of those involved. It helps ensure confidentiality and acts as a safety control which maintains the integrity of the process. The facilitator inspires staff to be more confident, to share their insights and suggestions.”

Confidentiality is another key feature of the Royal & SunAlliance approach. While managers are encouraged to discuss their feedback with their own managers, it is not compulsory. Participants in debriefs do not share the results and discussions with anyone else. Similarly, the contents of the individual coaching sessions remain ‘confidential. This can, be frustrating, but it is critical it would be great for management to have access to the information generated’ in coaching sessions and team debriefs. But the moment that happens, trust and openness would be lost.

Coaching meetings are held each quarter between the managers and one of the external consultants. These discussions cover issues arising from the feedback process, as well as other organisational problems and pressures. They can also discuss personal issues or concerns about their careers, or seek help to cope with the changes and pressures they face. Wherever possible, the managers are guided to develop action plans which are then reviewed at the next meeting.

We decided not to link the results of 360° Feedback to our performance appraisal system, because the feedback process is focused wholly on development. In time, we may look for an appropriate link; but the current feeling is that honesty, trust, and openness would be undermined if staff knew their observations could impact on-a manager’s performance review.

A 360° Feedback focus group recently met in London to pool the organisation’s worldwide expertise and share experiences, just like the New Zealand case study above. The group will be producing an A to Z guide to 360° Feedback and providing help for those businesses wanting to get started.

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