

How to get the most out of 360° feedback

A CFI Good Practice Guide

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About CFI

Coaching Foundation India Limited (CFI) is India's first institution dedicated to executive coaching. Its founding purpose is to create world class coaching professionals and offer comprehensive training and advisory solutions to individuals and organizations.

With businesses experiencing both unprecedented opportunities for growth and competitive pressures in equal measure, many executives now find themselves in new roles and company cultures that require managing more efficiently than ever before. In situations such as these, executive coaching acts as a catalyst to lift individuals and teams alike to their highest potential. Having completed over 600+ coaching engagements for leading global and Indian organizations, CFI has built deep insights into what constitutes coaching effectiveness.

This good practice guide is a result of these research insights. Through this guide, CFI aims to foster an appropriate application of coaching so that its' integrity is maintained.





About This Guide

This guide is meant to help leaders in Human Resources, Learning & Development and Talent Management who use 360-degree assessments as part of their assessment toolkits, to enhance the effectiveness of this tool.

The research and publication effort for this guide was led by Mr. Anand Kasturi. Anand is an experienced and award-winning Consultant Trainer and CFI Coach, with 30+ years of experience in leadership training with a focus on customer centricity / services management. He partners with clients from top notch organizations across the globe to provide training and coaching solution. He runs his own consultancy which offers a tool – 360changemagic that provides 360-degree feedback solutions to clients on an online platform.



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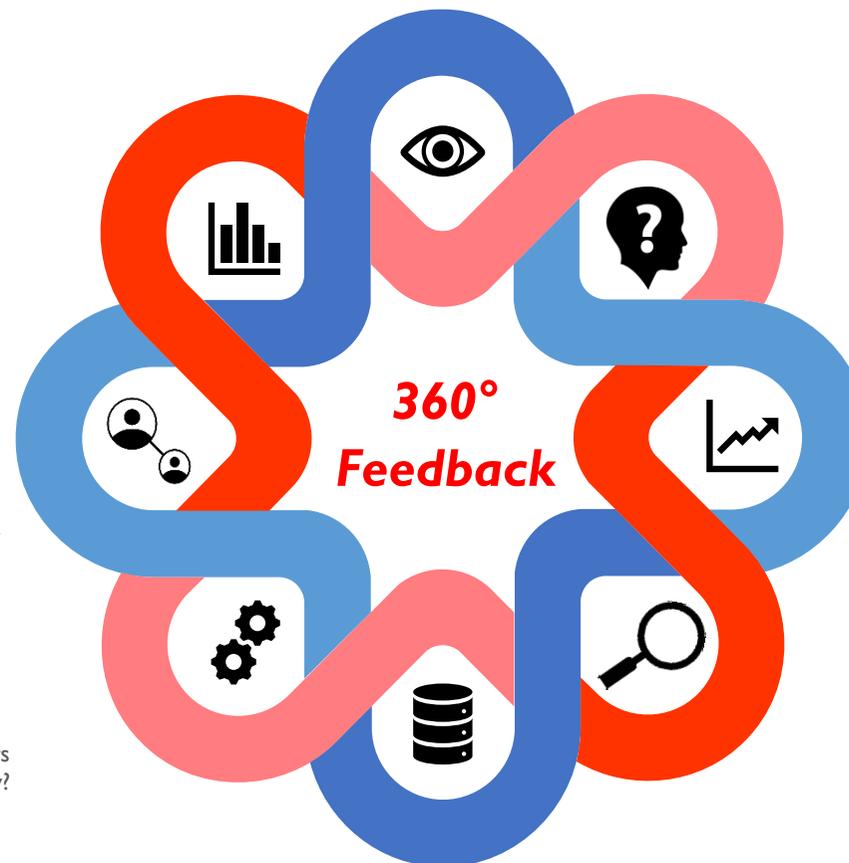
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Your organization has just given you an opportunity to take up a 360-degree assessment, in the context of performance coaching, development planning or just as a mechanism for improving personal effectiveness. You are curious to know what your colleagues, managers and subordinates think of you, but are also nervous about what they might say. Questions teem in your mind about who would access this information, how it could impact you and so on. You wish someone could offer clarity on this process, its intent and its uses in organizations.

Well, look no further because this guide has been created for this precise reason. It attempts to answer some of these questions for you and provide you with tips that can help you get the best out of this golden opportunity. We do hope you find this valuable and also enjoy reading it.

1. What is 360° feedback?

360° feedback is a process by which a person (the client) seeks and receives feedback from a range of stakeholders from 'all around'.

Traditionally, performance feedback used to be seen as something only a boss would give a subordinate. This is changing. Even in a performance feedback setting, organizations realise that feedback from a complete range of sources - boss, peers, subordinates - is more holistic and comprehensive.

360° feedback, however, is not restricted to the performance-assessment context ... it has powerful benefits when used in a developmental context. Today, leadership development initiatives, coaching engagements, and other growth and development programmes all use 360° feedback as an integral component.

Benefits of a 360° feedback exercise



1. What are the benefits of a 360° feedback exercise?

i. *Break the barrier of silence*

In our daily lives, we often do not have any platforms or forums for people to give feedback to us. The higher up in an organization you get, the less likely you'll receive feedback on yourself, your ideas, how you're doing. Even if you ask them, you are not likely to get complete and honest inputs with their perceptions - there are many possible emotional and psychological barriers.

A confidential, professionally-managed confidential 360° feedback process allows people to share their feedback, their concerns, their hopes and ideas in a non-threatening and 'safe' manner.

ii. *Build inclusivity and buy-in*

As the saying goes - "it is lonely at the top". People who are not engaged with their stakeholders run the risk of getting isolated.

A 360° feedback exercise engages key stakeholders - and they become involved. They have a say in the quality of team leadership, they have a greater sense of importance, their commitment to the leadership, the team and the organisation is positively impacted.

A Senior Manager in a company's R&D division had been experiencing huge problems with a peer (another Senior Manager - in Manufacturing). The CEO (both were reporting into him) put the first manager on an Executive Coaching programme with the clear goal of improving the relationship.



CASE STUDY

The manager included her peer in the list of stakeholders. The peer responded to the 360-degree feedback very constructively, providing many positives as well as areas for change. The openness and sincerity with which this feedback was received by the manager, and then worked upon - completely transformed the relationship. Communication between the two senior managers became much more collaborative (from confrontational), more proactive (from reactive), and more constructive (from defensive).

A 360-degree feedback exercise was done with a 25-member team, where every member (including the team leads, team manager) got feedback from everyone else. At the end of the exercise, a debrief was done with the entire team. When asked what emotions they experienced at the end of the exercise, the overwhelming majority of the team responded - "Relief!"....(contd.)



CASE STUDY

iii. Build relationships and trust

A 360° feedback exercise invariably leads to stronger relationships between the seeker and the providers of feedback. Respondents perceive that they are being given importance, that their inputs are valued - and this always leads to better relationships.

If the seeker demonstrates change based on the feedback, it leads to high trust - trust that the process works, trust that the seeker is authentic about listening, change and growth, trust that the respondent indeed plays an important role in the seeker's growth and change.

iv. Boost self-confidence, self-image

Clearly, the more confident you are, the less 'fragile' you are - and therefore more likely to ask for feedback.

By asking stakeholders for their feedback, your self-confidence is perceived to be high. You relate with others as a mature, stable and self-aware person who is OK with hearing the truth - even if it may be uncomfortable.

V.

Contd...

- Relief - that I was able to get this nagging point
- Relief - that I have got everyone's perceptions and feedback about me and that I am 'still breathing' and fine :-).
- Relief - that the process was nowhere as scary as I thought it would be - on the contrary, it was great in building a sense of bonding and togetherness!

A Head of HR was due to retire in a few years, and began a conversation with a coach on what he could be doing to prepare for this. His coach gathered 360-degree feedback from the HR Head's peers and boss (CEO of the company) - and their point of view was on a very different track altogether.



The company was embarking on a major re-organisation and business expansion - and they felt that the HR Head had some critical contributions to make to enable these programmes. They felt he should forget about retirement for now, and focus on the here-and-now.

The feedback galvanised the HR Head into action - and he was able to pull his weight with the company - which went on to successfully launch their change programmes.

vi. *Provides huge opportunities for change and improvement*

A well-designed 360° feedback exercise is focused strongly on development and growth. The purpose is to change for a better future, rather than dwell on the past. As Marshall Goldsmith, the globally renowned coach puts it - "Feedback (that) focuses on a past - on what has already occurred - can be limited and static. Information about the infinite variety of opportunities that can happen in the future, in contrast, is expansive and dynamic."

vii. *Test and validate self-perceptions*

A 360° feedback exercise can be an 'epiphany' moment - like holding a powerful 'mirror' in front of yourself. It can tell you things about yourself that you did not know about, or things that are very different from what you believed. Any self-deception is challenged, self-perceptions are tested and validated.

viii. *Get ideas different from your own, open your mind*

Oscar Wilde once said "Whenever people agree with me I always feel I must be wrong"! For real growth, it is essential to see things from many points of view - and not just your own. The 360° feedback exercise will lead to many people sharing their ideas about you, your approach, your style of working/ engaging, and so on. This will automatically help to open your mind to other possibilities - areas that you may not have considered at all. Also, new ideas may be born that are much better than the old ones you had.

A country head of a multinational IT organisation showed high resistance when the agenda for change was articulated as 'His people management skills are poor'.

He became somewhat defensive – argued that he was who he was, and that for every instance of an apparent 'poorly skilled' way of dealing with his people, he could come up with a counter-example of how such an approach had worked for him in the past.

Over a de-briefing conversation, the context was changed from past-focused (poor skills) to future-focused - 'How can he enable his direct reports to be able to take over from him in one year?'. To this question, the leader's response was completely different from the earlier one - this time he was positive, open and willing to work on the idea and successfully transformed himself and his effectiveness with his people.



CASE STUDY

ix. *See yourself from multiple perspectives*

We are 'different' with different people, behave differently in different contexts and so on. By definition, a '360-degree' feedback exercise gathers inputs from a group of very different stakeholders - in terms of profile, role, relationship to you, and so on. By pulling together the perspectives of this wide range of people, you will have the opportunity to identify patterns and connecting threads that lie beneath the observed reality which leads to powerful insight about yourself.

2. **What is the objective of doing a 360° feedback exercise?**

There is only one objective you should focus upon - and that is:

What do I need to prioritise, focus upon and implement - to move to my 'next level'?

While one can use a 360° feedback exercise as an 'assessment' (of the past), the most powerful use of a 360° feedback exercise is to help the individual decide on how s/he will move to the next level of their own effectiveness in the future.

People are often apprehensive, nervous about launching a 360° feedback exercise. They have questions like - "*What will people say about me?*", "*How bad will it be, to hear all the criticisms and negativity?*" and "*Won't people just use this opportunity to tell me all my faults?*"

Feedback is constructive and helpful if you are keen to turn it into a learning experience and move to your 'next level' (whatever that may be). Feedback is hurtful and scary if you are not open to learning or change. It is a choice between staying in the darkness or stepping into the light. As Thomas Szasz says ... "*Every act of conscious learning requires the willingness to suffer an injury to one's self-esteem. That is why young children, before they are aware of their own self-importance, learn so easily; and why older persons, especially if vain or important, cannot learn at all!*"

This tool may be introduced in a variety of different contexts or situations – as part of self development, in a coaching context, as an element of a training program, as an aid to career development, as a way of introducing a competency based culture or even as part of a formal appraisal process. Irrespective of the context though, remember your objective is to move ahead, and you can use the information from the 360° feedback to help you do that effectively.

3. Who should I select as respondents for my 360° feedback?

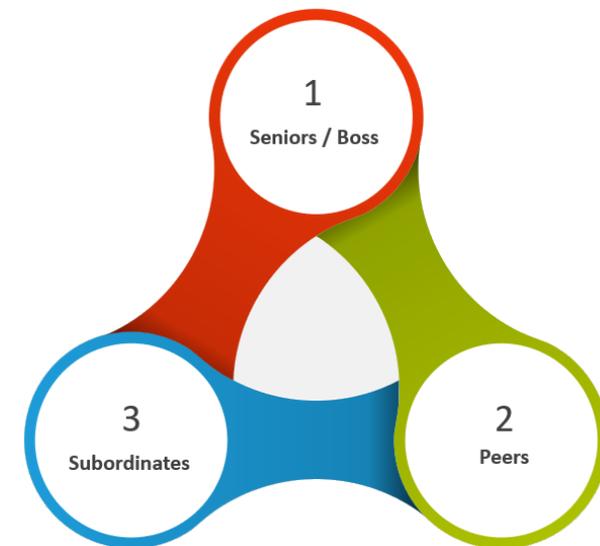
The most important criterion for selecting respondents is that they should have important feedback for you. To make it complete, you should choose stakeholders from 'all around you'.

At work, this would mean (at the least) the three categories of people depicted in the diagram – seniors / boss, peers, and subordinates.

You could also include other stakeholders if you believe their feedback will be important for you - e.g. customers, vendors, channel partners ...

It is good to consider including some respondents' from your personal life - outside the world of work. Friends and family members who know you well and are invested enough to provide insights into your strengths and areas for focus/ change can be very important stakeholders for you and should be included.

To avoid potential conflict situations where a sponsor or mentor could question a coachee's choice of respondents, it would be ideal to ask the coachee himself or herself to vet their list with their sponsor, in advance of sharing it. Asking the coachee questions such as those below, could also help the coachee be more mindful in his/her choice of respondents.



- If you showed this list to your manager, would he/she approve of your choice of respondents? Is there anyone they would add?
- Is there anyone you have conflicts with whose feedback might provide insights or a different perspective?

There is no 'formula' to specify how many stakeholders you should invite to give feedback - but about 8 to 15 people is a good number.

3. Why is my own perception important? (i.e. should I respond to my own 360° survey?)

When gathering feedback from all around (360°), one's own 'self-assessment' is a crucial input. While it is important to get the perspectives from all others around a person, the person also needs to reflect upon and formally document their own perceptions of themselves.

The overall objective of any such 360° feedback survey is to support the individual's growth and development. Three important questions in such a process are -

- Where am I today?
- Where do I want to be?
- How do I get there?

To get a full, holistic, complete understanding of where you are today, it is essential that your own inputs are also included in the 360° survey. Of course, please remember that this information flows back only to you - so it will be as useful to you as you are objective and honest with yourself!

4. What are the different ways in which a 360° feedback exercise can be done?

There are basically three ways to get 360° feedback -

- Online survey
- Paper forms, or XL sheets emailed to respondents
- Interview-based survey

Of the three, online surveys are probably the easiest to set up and execute. They require little bandwidth to manage, and there are many web-based 360° feedback survey providers to choose from. Alternatively, you can set up one yourself using online tools such as SurveyMonkey.

Paper forms, or XL sheets emailed to respondents are extremely labour-intensive options. They require dedicated resources to despatch, track/ monitor, and then analyze and compile the responses into a report. Further - these options do not ensure 100% confidentiality/ anonymity. Best avoided.

Interview-based surveys are again labour-intensive - but can provide deeply insightful feedback from important stakeholders. If your coaching engagement includes a qualitative interview-based 360° feedback, the coach will reach out to important stakeholders that you identify and engage individually with them to gather their perceptions about you, your strengths and your areas for focus/ change. Such an exercise can produce a report that is richly textured and full of nuances and eye-opening information that will be enormously useful to the development process.

5. What should be the parameters included in the 360° feedback survey?

Especially in the case of an online 360° feedback survey, you should carefully select the parameters to be included. Online 360° feedback survey providers will offer you a 'default' choice of items.

Pick items that you believe are relevant - based on your role, your seniority, your overall development goals, and your objectives for engaging in a 360° feedback exercise.

Another possible source for parameters is your organisation's "leadership competency framework" - check with the HR department for this or related frameworks.

When selecting parameters, do note the common mistakes people make

- *Too many items* - don't make it cumbersome for the respondent to provide feedback. If there are too many items (more than 50 could be 'too many') then you run the risk of people not being able to focus separately and distinctly on each item they are asked for feedback about.
- *Microscopic detail* - if your items drill down to too fine a level of detail, then the feedback may sound relevant but in fact be useless. An example - asking about 'Openness to learning' is fine but asking about "the extent to which you read and use articles on marketing from the Harvard Business Review" is probably too microscopic in detail.
- *Quantitative > Qualitative* - it's easy to see the value of quantitative scores in any feedback, and 360° feedback is no exception. But be careful and don't get so seduced by quantitatives that you don't provide enough opportunities for respondents to write qualitative information. Remember, a 360° feedback should provide information to help you make good decisions about your development, your future. Qualitative information is invaluable for this purpose.

6. Is it better to share an e-copy or share the 360 feedback in person where you can look at body language and help the person process their emotions?

The decision to share the 360 report over email earlier or in person would require good judgement on the part of the coach. The coachee's ability to process the feedback would also depend on the level of trust established in the relationship. If high levels of trust have not yet been established, it may be better to share feedback in person where the coach can help the coachee work through his/her emotions in the face of this feedback. If trust is high, the report can be shared earlier and debriefed / discussed again in a personal meeting.

7. What do I do with the 360° feedback report as soon as I receive it?

It is important to get a detailed idea of the information in the 360° feedback report. These reports vary from one provider to the other, but there will invariably be various analyses and insights presented - apart from the 'raw data' of scores and comments.

To take it all in on just one reading is impossible. Read it multiple times. Use colours to highlight sections ... use your own key (e.g. *stuff I agree with, stuff that I think is important, something to be explored in more detail, hey! this is surprising, ...* and so on). If you're comfortable using tools like mindmaps - they can help you understand the material more effectively.

DO's

- Read it, multiple times
- Get a gist, an overview of what the feedback is saying
- Make notes, mindmap, annotate, highlight
- Leave it to 'simmer' in the mind, keep it at the background
- Talk to your coach, or someone you trust/ invested in your growth and development
- Focus on the question - How can I use this information for my benefit/ growth/ development?
- Decide objectively on what you'd like to do with the feedback
- Thank your respondents
- Set goals, make changes
- Monitor changes - in yourself, and in others' perceptions



DONT's

- Get hung up on a stance based on emotional reactions
- Do any 'witch-hunting'
- See it as a personal acceptance or rejection of you
- Assume that you have to take on board everything everybody says
- Limit your options to just 'accept-or-reject'



So - you have received a 360° feedback report!

A generally accepted model that portrays the reactions to such a report is labelled "SARA".

S - Shock

A - Anger

R - Rationalisation

A - Acceptance

The normal and universal first reaction is Shock. Receiving feedback can be an overwhelming experience, often stressful (and this report has feedback in a 'concentrated' form!). People generally experience a sense of disbelief - with thoughts such as

- *Are you sure you've got the right report?*
- *I knew this was going to be a very 'negative' exercise, and now I am proved right!*
- *People have used this forum to 'get back' at me!*

Very soon, this leads to Anger. The individual feels his/ her individuality is being judged and criticised, and this leads to antagonistic feelings, such as:

- *I can also tell you bad things about these folks!*
- *Who are these people to say these things?*
- *How can I be so 'bad' and yet reach the position I've reached?!*

With time, the anger turns to Rationalisation. The feedback receiver tries to justify or otherwise 'explain' the feedback, or slot it into a mental 'box' to put away. Typical thoughts are:

- *Nobody is perfect. Everyone has some faults.*
- *This is who I am - I cannot become someone else!*
- *I was aware of all this, there's nothing new here for me to consider.*

Clearly all three reactions are dysfunctional and ineffective - and you should take care to move forward to the last stage i.e. Acceptance. Step past the Shock, Anger and Rationalisation stages quickly and lightly.

Three possible strategies that could help are - to write, to talk and to meditate.

- Writing about your emotions and reflections - especially through the S-A-R stages - can help a lot. This process helps in calming one down, and in increasing mindfulness, self-awareness. Keep a log, a diary, a 'little black book'; perhaps 'letters to myself'?
- Talking can also help - talking with someone who is close to you, someone you trust, someone who can just listen without judgement or advice. Margureite Theophil writes in *The Speaking Tree* of a "*delightful story about a little boy who was late getting home one day. When his mother asked why he was late, he explained that he had stopped to help a friend whose bicycle had broken down. "But you don't know how to fix a bicycle," his mother said. "No," the little boy said, "But I stopped to be with him while he cried."* Find a friend like that little boy!
- Meditation too is a powerful tool in becoming mindful of your emotional state and helps to develop a sense of calm

7. How can I leverage this information for my benefit?

Once you reach Acceptance, the only question to ask is - *How can I leverage this information for my benefit?*

Don't get 'seduced' with questions like "*Who said that?*", or "*Do I have to agree with it all?*", or even "*On what basis are they saying this ... it's not clear to me?*". These don't lead you anywhere useful, just forget about them. If they do come up ... sidestep them!

Laura Spencer in her book "Winning through Participation" explains the methodology called "Focused Conversations". When seeking to think through any event or stimulus, the methodology prescribes four steps or perspectives, in sequence.

- It starts with the "Objective" - facts and data (What are the words and phrases people have used when describing my strengths? Words/ phrases to describe the areas for focus?).
- Second comes "Reflective" - emotions and past associations (What emotions did I experience as I read and reflected on the feedback? How would I describe the impact of the feedback on me?).
- The third step is to move to "Interpretive" - learning and meaning (What is becoming clearer to me about myself? What is the learning from this feedback - for me to take away? What are some priority areas I should focus upon?).
- And finally, "Decisional" - action and implementation (What should I do, going forward?).

A powerful way to help you through this process is your coach. Most people find receiving 360-degree feedback to be an emotional process. The emotions can vary from excitement to fear - as discussed earlier.

It requires conscious application of skills and maturity to move from feedback reports to useful change/ implementation plans. The 360° feedback provides the raw materials for growth; coaching helps you transform this information into meaningful actions.

8. Who should I share this information with?

First, yourself! Take time to read it, digest it, reflect upon it ... and review it periodically.

Then - anyone that you think can contribute anything at all. Mentors, your boss, your close friends and family ... are all potential stakeholders to share this information with. Some people choose to share the report with every single respondent who gave them feedback - as a token of gratitude, and also to affirm the seriousness with which they take it.

Most importantly, it is useful to share your change/ improvement goals with some of these key stakeholders. There is a lot of research to show that we tend to take 'publicised' goals more seriously than goals we keep entirely to ourselves. You may like to use an online tool to help you with this - www.stickk.com for example.

9. How often should I do a 360° feedback exercise?

At least once a year.

10. What are the ethics to be mindful of while running a 360?

It is important that 360 degree feedback is carried out sensitively and fairly. There should be adequate planning beforehand and support afterwards for the participants. Those giving feedback should be encouraged to do so in an objective and positive way. The confidentiality of all participants should be respected. Receivers of feedback should be offered support to act on feedback.

A 360 should never be used as an excuse to facilitate exits from the organization. This would be a dangerously wrong way of using this tool.

11. What is the best time to run a 360?

Unfortunately there isn't 'a one size fits all' answer. To a great extent it depends on what else is going on in the organisation, what you want to achieve, and what other priorities and pressures the people involved will have at the time. Here are some of the usual times organisations choose to do a 360:

a) Before and after a training or development programme

Typically when organizations are planning a development programme for managers or rising talent that is spread over several months, a 360 appraisal can make a good 'before and after' measure. There should ideally be at least nine months between the two measures, ideally at least a couple of months after the training programme has finished, to give delegates a fair chance of demonstrating their improved skills.

b) As a separate annual event

Some companies have a well established appraisal system for each employee to get feedback and plan business based objectives with their line manager. They use 360 feedback as a separate development activity for the individual, and often give them the opportunity to discuss their report with a coach instead of their line manager

c) When change is taking place

Companies also use 360 feedback more strategically, as an organisational development tool. If new teams or structures have been put into place, a 360 programme will reveal how individuals have risen to the challenge, but also give insights into the bigger picture

A 360 tool can thus be a revelation when used in the right context, and provide a richness of insight to influence behaviour change. We hope you find this guide to 360 useful. If you have queries, please write to us at researchdesk@cfi.co.in and we will be happy to help.