360 DEGREE FEEDBACK IN INDIA

By

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The spirit of feedback-Looking back

The spirit of 360 Degree feedback in India goes back many years when good kings used to go in disguise to find out the perceptions of their people on the way they were ruling, their style, and impact of their decisions and the way they were living and feeling. Even in Ramayana, Lord Rama used spies (Goodacharis) to find out how people felt and even if one person said something bad, Lord Rama acted on it instead of punishing the person who said it. He sent his wife away to punish himself. Even Emperor Akbar is said to have used the method of going in disguise to find out how people were living and the impact his decisions had on his people.

Origins of 360 Degree Feedback in India

Modern organizations did not exist in those days. If they did, perhaps India would have been rated as the most innovative country in terms of its HR processes. Many managers look at borrowing practices from the west. While there is nothing wrong in borrowing good practices, but to think "People Management practices" are the best from the west while ignoring our traditions and experience is perhaps ignoring the treasures we have within. As Nitin Sawadekar (2002) quoted in his book on Assessment Centres, Assessment Centres methodology was known to have been used or at least recommended to be used by kings at least 1500 years ago in India as mentioned in Kautilya's Arthasshastra, where different methods were used to assess a candidate for Ministerial positions including Observation, Performance Appraisal, and Assessment by those who know the candidate, Interviews and other forms of Testing, etc.

I stumbled on the methodology of 360 Degree feedback on my own. Since the time I started my career in 1968 as a Lecturer in Psychology, I have been using Psychometric tools. As students at Osmania University, tests like TAT, Allport, Vernon Lindzey values scale, DAT, and various other personality tests were taken by most of us in 1966-68. I used to teach the same and was introduced to FIRO-B and other tools in the 70s These tools were used extensively in the Achievement Motivation Laboratories conducted by us at NIHAE, Delhi; the University of Udaipur, and later at IIMA. Back then, Psychologists were licensed to use tests that were not as commercialized as they are today. These tests were sold only to Psychology degree holders. Bodies like ISABS developed a new era of Behavioural Science Professionals who were trained and encouraged to use such tools. I have extensively used tools to measure Work Values, Locus of Control, Interpersonal Trust, Tolerance for Ambiguity, etc. We have used these instruments in the many Executive Development Programs conducted at IIMA and as a part of ISABS. I have even developed a Psychosocial Maturity Scale with Abigail Stewart (Now at the University of Michigan Department of Psychology) using TAT. David McClelland invited me to do this after he looked at the work I was doing on entrepreneurship.

It was in one of the programs at IIMA where we used these tools, some of the participants suggested that these tools are useful, but they could be more useful if there was some way of knowing how people thought of them. It is this suggestion that made me start a program in IIMA in 1986. It was as soon as I returned from XLRI and I proposed this program to the OB Area, which promptly approved the same. Prof. Pradip Khandwalla encouraged this by joining and lending his tool on Management Styles developed in Canada. Measuring ten different styles of the top

management as a group, I used the leadership style tool I developed based on the work we did with McClelland on Indian Managers. With J. P. Singh joining us with his tools on decision making, we launched the first program which required the participants to register three months in advance and give us the names of about 15 to 20 people with whom they interacted in the last few years from their Juniors, colleagues, and seniors as well as friends and acquaintances whose views they valued. We were surprised to get around 60 nominations for the program as we did not expect more than 15 to 20. We did not want to take them all as the program was emotionally involving and many tests were involved. We designed the program as a three-day workshop where we used several tests to assess their Styles, Roles, Decision Making, Delegation, Interpersonal Behaviour, etc. The tests required a couple of hours to answer. In our first program, we had top-level Managers from all over the country like K. L. Chug, Mahendra Agarwal, Sinha from SRF, Arora from reliance, Anil Sachdev from Eicher, and so on. The first day was devoted to explaining the tools based on self-assessment, the concepts behind the tool, and their significance to leadership. The Program itself was titled "Leadership Styles and Organizational Effectiveness". The participants were eager to know how their styles were assessed and the impact they had made on Organizational Effectiveness. The second day was devoted to giving them feedback, tool by tool. On the third day, they were required to choose one or two behaviors that they would like to change or further develop. The focus was on the weak areas rather than on their strengths. We created simulations on the third day to give the participants a chance to experiment with the new behaviors. Not all of them had an opportunity but a few did. For example, we simulated meetings to test out how they would conduct meetings and improve the same. The group would thereafter give them feedback.

The program was a great success and we repeated this program the next year also with the first batch of the sixty participants who registered. Hrishikesh Mafatlal sent this entire top management and later Prof. Ramnarayan joined the team and we started conducting in-house programs. Little did we know at that time that this methodology will be christened in the USA as 360 Degree feedback. Once we knew that it was called 360-degree Feedback, we continued using this term without changing our philosophy.

When I look back at the last 25 years since we started this program and methodology, I am left with a sense of satisfaction that we made some difference to those who like to make a difference. We have retained our methodology and tried to counter the intrusion from other parts of the world into our philosophy and methodology.

Once I started my company TVRLS, I even invited Larry Cippola from CCI, a Minnesota-based company to come to India and share with us their approach and methodology. Larry offered a few joint programs with TVRLS in 1998. One was held in Hyderabad and another in Mumbai and Larry also addressed the National HRD Network in its Conference at Delhi 1998. Larry used to introduce his firm as a vendor of 360 tools and I used to feel a little strange as the term "vendor" did not go well with our philosophy that knowledge is not for sale. But now we have learnt perhaps the hard way. We still maintain that knowledge is for sharing and developing society. My continuous struggle to discourage corporations from the tendering process is in tune with this philosophy. We sell knowledge for those who can afford it so that we can build more from the money we collect, but we give it free for those who cannot. For example, we offer 360 DF for teachers and Head Masters with little or no investments while for profit-making organizations, there is a charge. Sometime in early

2002, we were invited by a corporation to conduct a 360 DF program based on the Leader-Manager tool developed in the UK. We assisted them with our process and later contacted the tool vendor in Australia (Ronald Forbes of 360 Degree Facilitated).

Today, there are many individuals/consulting organizations conducting 360 Degree Feedback. We have learnt many lessons from our work on 360 DF. These lessons are summarised in our latest book on Life after 360 Published by Excel Publications and edited by Prof. S Ramnarayan, Nandini Chawla, and Myself. A few of these lessons include:

1. All assessments of people by other people are subjective. Hence, 360-degree feedback can be as subjective as any other assessment. However, it is the aggregate feedback and consistency in feedback that tends to make it more objective.
2. 360 DF should be used as indicative and reflected upon.
3. 360 DF could also be provocative. The candidate should use this for review, reflection, and action.
4. The action plans worked out as an outcome of the feedback, should primarily be directed at empowering self and changing oneself where necessary.
5. Even if one has to change others, it requires a change in oneself: one's approach, attitude, communication, etc.
6. 360 DF should be used for self-empowerment and use enhanced awareness to become a more effective leader.

(As given in the manual for Leadership development through 360 Degree Feedback by TVRLS)

We don't believe in 360 Degree Appraisals. But we do believe in Feedback for development. In my view, those organizations that use 360 Degree Feedback for Appraisal, rewards, and promotions or increments, etc. are undermining the process and are likely to create new forms of politicking and manipulation in organizations.

Tips for facilitating 360 Degree Feedback:

- One should understand human psychology and should have the right background and skill to give feedback. Today, there are many ways of acquiring the skills to provide 360 DF services: ISABS, Sumedhas, Coaching Foundation of India, and TVRLS to name a few and many others offer programs to develop Facilitation skills.
- One must be sensitive to feelings and the Indian mind-set. We (in India) are still not good at giving and receiving feedback and hence the feedback needs to be interpreted with caution.
- People should be helped to use it as an empowering tool. It is advisable to read some books or literature before conducting a 360 DF. Just because one is an MBA in HR or an HR Consultant, it is not right to declare oneself as a 360 specialist unless one has experienced the same oneself.

Tips while choosing 360 Degree Feedback Tools:

- Choose the tool to suit your purpose.
- You may not keep using the same tool again and again. It is good enough if you use it the first time and the second time after a gap of six months to a year and then at three-year and five-year periods.
- However, the tool you use could be shorter and you may have to keep changing the tool depending on your needs.
- Some tools are based on well-researched constructs: Example Leader-Manager tool, RSDQ© tools, etc. Many tools have face validity

Other Tips while choosing 360 Degree Feedback Tools:

There are some off-the-shelf tools and other free tools available online. These are good tools for an interested person to take for the first time. However, for systematic leadership development, guided learning might be more beneficial and it is even better if the organization facilitates the same.

It is a good practice to ask questions on validity, reliability, etc. for tools that are based on constructs. Make sure that your executives understand the constructs easily. Some tools that use factors are more difficult to assimilate and use. The items are more important than the constructs. And these items should be easily understood and usable. The issue of reliability is difficult as 360 is expected to bring change. If you administer it the second time the answers are different, it is not fully correct to conclude the tool as not reliable. If any, the tool may have worked. Hence your interpretation of the psychometric properties needs to be done cautiously for 360 tools.

While graphic presentations of feedback go a long way in communicating feedback, it is not wise to choose a tool on how well the feedback is presented. Some tools are not rich in content but extremely well presented with graphs etc. Simple tools don't require sophisticated validity and reliability coefficients. Usability is more important than psychometrics. If you are showing the tool to a few of your executives before administration and they are modifying the tool or choosing items of relevance to them you are already doing a "Face Validity" check.

Way Ahead

A good 360 DF should be followed by Action Plans, Sharing of Action Plans, and Reviewing Action Plans. Organizations will get better returns on their investments if they have follow-up workshops and coaching sessions. Just undertaking a 360 Degree Feedback Survey and leaving it may not be a wise idea.

References and other resources

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