

PERCEPTION OF THE MIDDLE-LEVEL MANAGERS ON 360-DEGREE FEEDBACK PROCESS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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Abstract Organizations have employed 360-degree feedback as a tool for performance assessment and employee development for almost a decade now, with reasonable success. However, as there are always two sides to everything, 360-degree as an assessment tool is not an exception. Due caution may have to be employed by organizations, before they use this tool for assessment. Authors attempted to investigate the perception of the middle-level managers, working in different sectors, in the cities of Bangalore and Mysore, on the 360-degree feedback process. Data revealed that the average importance level assigned to the issues of overall 360-degree feedback process, by the respondents, was significantly different. Also, there was significant sector-specific difference between average importance levels assigned to the issues of overall 360-degree feedback process. However, there was no gender-specific difference in the average importance level assigned to the issues. Based on the research findings, HR Departments may initiate in-depth employee opinion survey to investigate whether the managers forwarded socially acceptable responses. Also, HR Departments of the respective companies need to investigate the parameters of the respective company's culture. Further cross-sectoral studies are also needed to substantiate the present study findings

Keywords: 360-Degree Feedback, Process Ownership, Confidentiality, Anonymity, Rater

INTRODUCTION

Performance appraisal as HR function is at once both interesting and problematic as it raises several concerns both for the individual and the organization. Every organization struggle to decide about the kind of appraisal that would be best suited for evaluating its employees at various levels of hierarchy within it. The challenge is to make the process as transparent, accurate and as much, error free, as possible, so that, employees being evaluated feel that, is a fair process of assessment which captures their performance in a relatively unbiased manner and duly recognizes them for the contributions they have made in the organization. In this context of measuring performance both within and among the groups, organizations have sought to use 360-degree feedback, as a tool for performance assessment and employee development, for quite some time now, with reasonable success. Companies have used this tool to assess group-based performance in their respective organizations. Inevitably, as there are always two sides to everything, 360-degree as an assessment tool does not stand out as an exception. Due caution needs to be taken by organizations, before using this tool for the purpose of assessment. The

matter becomes more complicated when same members work across various cross-functional teams to fulfil differential needs of organizations. This is now particularly true for those organizations involved in consulting assignments for multiple clients and increasingly becoming project-based in their offerings. Individuals working in several projects within a given time frame in their organizations need to be assessed and recognized for their individual contributions in various groups. What also needs to be factored is the group's overall contribution to the revenue-earning contributions to the organization, while maintaining client satisfaction by ensuring successful and critically event-free completion of the projects, in a mutually agreed upon time frame. In the present paper, the authors have sought to investigate the perception of the middle level managers on the 360-degree feedback process, working in the cities of Bangalore and Mysore.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

360-degree feedback is being increasing used as a tool to measure the individual's contribution and effectiveness in achieving, not only his/her individuals allocated goals, but,

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also, the group/departmental goals (CIPD, 2003; Kearns, 2004). Typically, in this process, the organizational members rate each other on certain pre-determined common parameters, decided by the organizations to assess the performance of individuals. Both behavioral and non-behavioral aspects, are used as measuring parameters in this process. Self-appraisal, along with the peer- and subordinate-rating usually constitutes this assessment. The higher authority (reporting authority) also provides his/her assessment, based on the peer assessment, and on their own understanding and perception of the subordinate, being evaluated. Some organizations also include feedback of other relevant stakeholders like clients, customers and vendors or other relevant stakeholders. This multi-rater system may be used for a variety of purposes, such as, performance appraisal, promotions, pay increase, and as a developmental tool for career progression and also a mechanism for ensuring talent differentiation process in an organization. The basic idea behind using this tool is to meet stakeholder expectations in line with the various functional roles being played by organizational members in a given business context. The 360 review is a professional feedback opportunity for all co-workers to provide feedback about a colleague's performance. Earlier, such feedback was normally solicited from the manager to whom the employee reported (Heathfield, 2018). Other advantages that may be gained from using this sort of method are creation of a performance-based organizational culture, generation of comparative inter-departmental picture of performance and succession planning through effective talent management (Rogel, 2017). On the psychological side, the advantages gained may be by way of prompting dialogue for problem-solving among and between group members; increased accountability; enhancement of performance; increased self-awareness; and becoming better job fit and organizational fit; becoming better team workers; and may lead to better utilization of the training, for the sake of increased developmental purposes. Applying 360-degree feedback into the appraisal process as a developmental tool have helped organizations, to integrate the process, as a part of their *performance management system*. This helps organizations in multiple ways such as determining performance-related pay (Warr & Ainsworth, 1999); possibility of objectivity assessment of overall performance-based on multi-rater feedback and depending less on subjective opinions (Goodge, 2002) and so on. The advantages of 360-degree feedback have been thoroughly documented. For example, several authors have opined that it increases consistency in the performance. Many authors have provided valuable insights on the current use of 360- and 720-degree performance appraisal in Indian organizations (for example, Sing & Vadivelu, 2018). Employees feel motivated to as they view themselves to be involved as direct contributors towards the organizational performance (Jagtap, 2018).

Also, 360-degree feedback is a crucial factor that helps in increasing the productivity of an organization (Vijay Anand et al., 2018). Employees' performance goes up when they are productive (Fleenor & Prince, 2016). 360-degree approach has become instrumental in reducing the spoilage rate in the organizations (Zondo, 2017). However, a number of authors have also argued that managers can become defensive—and use their power to become retributive—if they do not like what is written about them in the feedback. Anonymous feedback can lead to undermining of the transparent, open and trusting culture people wish to create in modern organizations today (Wilkie, 2016). In developing countries such as India, direct feedback from various stakeholders can lead to generation of confusing results in the appraisal system (Rohatgi & Singh, 2017). On the other hand, many authors also argued that many Indian organizations continue to follow the traditional or conventional assessment criteria and systems and reject contemporary appraisal methods and techniques (Dauda, 2018).

The success of the 360-degree feedback process depends largely on the receiver's acceptance of the feedback being provided and, thereby, acting upon it. A number of factors, may influence a receiver's decision to do so, in the context which are listed below:

- the degree to which the feedback was constructive and the degree of the trustworthiness of the feedback provider matter (Gray, 2001);
- feedback process is viewed as worthwhile by them (Goodge & Burr, 1999);
- option to choose the rater and consequently perceiving organizations as being more supportive, inducing change- adaptive behavior (Gray, 2001);
- the degree of positivity, fairness, accuracy and usefulness of the feedback being provided to them (Cawly et al., 1998).
- The mediating factor seemed to 'Discomfort' in a positive correlation between the level of the participant's cultural value of interdependence and rating leniency (Saffie-Robertson & Brutus, 2014).
- Culture plays a major role in determining the effectiveness of upward feedback (Yen, 2018).
- Thorough training of employees is a must for employees, engaged in providing 360 feedback process (Ramamoorthy & Kavitha, 2017). The training must ensure employees learning to accept the feedback with right spirit and mindset (Yadav, 2018).

There are certain key factors, that may influence the 360-degree ratings such as: confidentiality with regard to maintaining anonymity, especially while involved in rating superiors and peers (Kettley, 1997; Meyer, 1980); timeliness

of feedback; and the kind of performance indicators that are being used. This method could impact organizations in an adverse way, if not used, with caution and care, and could be damaging and have irreversible effects in the organization. In this context, many researchers (Pollack & Pollack, 1996; London et al., 1990; Bettenhausen & Fedor, 1997) have opined that 360-degree feedback as a developmental tool is more effective than when used for the purpose of appraisal. Specifically, it may lead to the following:

- mistrust among organizational and team members affecting the emotional fabric and trust;
- generation of fear and anger among members of the organizations;
- upsurge of vicious political climate; or the tool being excessively used for ingratiation of key members by vested interest groups for self-service and monopolization of resources;
- using it as a tool for victimizing other organizational members, whom the raters may dislike;
- may lead to biased appraisal, especially, if, leaders are unaware of the political motives involving the feedback process; and
- increased attrition due to victimization of certain individuals arising out of political motives in the organization.
- 360-degree approach requires commitment from the top management, capable of instituting a culture of clear communication and trust (Taylor, 2011).

In order to use 360-degree feedback in an unbiased manner, the source, using this method, becomes a vital element for its successful implementation. Selectively, the organization may involve specific stakeholders for specific feedback purposes for assessment of specific role-based functionaries. The relevant sources may be considered on a need basis in the context of organizations in which they may be involved as a feedback provider: First-line supervisor/senior manager, peers, subordinates, and the person-in-question himself/herself (self-assessment). For example, the first-line supervisors/senior managers, must be trained in the techniques of providing feedback and appraisal; have sufficient knowledge of the employees and the roles they are assessing; have understanding of political equations, that may tarnish the rating process; and, be willing to make transitions to the coaching role from the judging-role, on the basis of additional inputs obtained from peer feedback. However, like other sources, needless to say, care and caution need to be taken. Similarly, in the case of peer evaluations, the feedback results must be used only for developmental purposes and not for determining pay, promotion or job

retention purposes, along with being possibly used for the purpose of recognition and awards. Using Subordinates for ratings and feedback may usher in a sense of insecurity among the seniors and supervisors with a feeling that their authority may become diluted in the process. To avoid such situations, only subordinates working for a good number of years possessing enough maturity should be included as assessors.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Based on the above discussions, the authors attempted to investigate the perception of the middle level managers, working in the cities of Bangalore and Mysore, on the 360-degree feedback process. Based on the existing literature, and preliminary discussion with the HR managers of 20 companies, across the sectors, the following twelve issues (now onwards, termed as variables) were proposed for investigation: 'Line managers' behavior'; 'Accountability of line managers'; 'Subjectivity of the process'; 'Collection of data'; 'Training'; 'Allocated time'; 'Method for rater inclusion', 'Secrecy in participation'; 'Honesty of the raters'; 'Bias of the raters'; 'Raters' understanding of the process'; and, 'Consistent participation from raters';

The present study had the objectives to investigate whether there was any difference in the average importance level assigned by the respondents across gender and sectors, to the variables of the overall 360-degree feedback process. Additionally, based on the collected data, the authors also wanted to check whether the proposed variables could be grouped into certain factors.

Following hypotheses were tested:

Hypothesis 1

- Hypothesis 1₀: There will be no significant difference between the average importance levels assigned to the variables, of overall 360-degree feedback process, by the respondents.
- Hypothesis 1_a: There will be significant difference between the average importance levels assigned to the variables of overall 360-degree feedback process, by the respondents.

Hypothesis 2

- Hypothesis 2₀: There will be no significant sector-specific difference between the average importance levels assigned to the variables, of the overall 360-degree feedback process, by the respondents.

- Hypothesis 2_a: There will be significant sector-specific difference between average importance levels assigned to the variables of the overall 360-degree feedback process, by the respondents.

Hypothesis 3

- Hypothesis 3₀: There will be no significant gender-specific difference between the average importance levels assigned to the variables, of the overall 360-degree feedback, by the respondents.
- Hypothesis 3_a: There will be significant gender-specific difference between the average importance levels assigned to the variables, of the overall 360-degree feedback, by the respondents.

METHODOLOGY

The sample for the study was the middle-level managers, with 8 to 15 years of experience, working in the cities of Bangalore and Mysore. For the study, non-probability sampling technique was used. A questionnaire was constructed, with twelve items, each item representing one of the twelve above-mentioned variables, in the context of the 360-degree feedback process.

The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale. The study was conducted in two phases. In the pilot study, the questionnaire was administered among 80 managers. 59 filled up responses were received, out of which 34 were male and 25 were female managers. Among the respondents, 10 managers were from Banking Sector, 15 were from FMCG Sector, 15 were from IT Sector, 8 were from Retail Sector, and the rest 11 were from the other sectors (Consultancy, Hospitality, Construction) sectors. This was done to test the consistency level of the questionnaire.

In the final study, the questionnaire was administered among 193 managers. 121 filled up responses were received, among which 77 were male and 44 were the female managers. Among the respondents, 26 managers were from Banking Sector, 16 were from FMCG Sector, 35 were from IT Sector, 20 were from Retail Sector, and the rest 24 were from the other sectors (Consultancy, Hospitality, Construction) sectors. The collected data was used for analyzing whether the variables could be grouped into certain factors. Also, the above-mentioned hypotheses were tested.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In the pilot study, 59 filled up responses were received. The questionnaire was proved to have the required consistency

level, in measuring the same (Cronbach's Alpha = .641). Value of KMO (.5 or more) and communalities (.5 or more) were also checked. In the final study, 121 filled up responses were received. The questionnaire was proved to have the required consistency level, in measuring the same (Cronbach's Alpha = .7). Further analysis was done, based on the data collected. It was noted from the data that, for all the variables, communalities value was more than .5. Therefore, the percentage of variance in each of the variables, meets the required levels. The sample supported the association between all the variables (value of KMO was .5 or more (Table 1). Therefore, there was a significant association between the variables in explaining the managers' perception towards the 360-degree feedback process.

In order to investigate, whether the variables could be grouped into certain factors, further analysis was conducted. The first five eigenvalues (value are ≥ 1) accounted for 69.15% of the variance. Based on the Eigenvalues, it was noted that, the twelve variables could be grouped into total five latent factors. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was used to find the latent factors, which were the resultants of observed variable-grouping. Factor matrix from rotated Varimax revealed that, certain observed variables could be listed under a specific factor. For each of the above-mentioned five factors, Cronbach Alpha was more than .6, which proved that correlation among the variables, under each factor, was acceptable. The nomenclature for the factors, based on the literature and authors' insight, with the respective variables were proposed as follows:

Factor I: 'Process ownership' – variables: 'Line managers' behavior'; 'Accountability of line managers'; 'Subjectivity of the process';

Factor II: 'Feedback process' – variables: 'Collection of data'; 'training'; 'Allocated time';

Factor III: 'Confidentiality'- variables: 'Method for rater inclusion', and, 'Secrecy in participation'

Factor IV: 'Anonymity' – variables: 'Honesty of the raters'; 'Bias of the raters';

Factor V: 'Raters' role' – variables: 'Raters' understanding of the process'; 'Consistent participation from raters'.

Taking into consideration the average score in the Descriptive statistics (Table 1), one can note that, the managers give more or less similar consideration towards almost all the variables, under each factor.

Table 1: Final Study: Descriptive Statistics, KMO values, Communalities

variables	Mean	Std dev	Skewness	Kurtosis	KMO values	Communalities
Line managers' behavior	3.619835	0.959654	-0.5495	-0.69568	0.710295	0.719111
Accountability of line managers	3.495868	1.001033	-0.26722	-1.05215	0.699833	0.80251
Subjectivity of the process	3.652893	0.882333	-0.43986	-0.45732	0.736224	0.769552
Collection of data	3.520661	1.025501	-0.3394	-1.08978	0.648344	0.557033
Training	3.421488	1.046837	-0.34229	-0.95265	0.5	0.641485
Allocated time	3.619835	0.87803	-0.74909	-0.30166	0.540853	0.677894
Method for rater inclusion	3.578512	0.928727	-0.51897	-0.67264	0.496295	0.735139
Secrecy in participation	3.528926	0.817255	-0.32728	-0.43318	0.555225	0.567142
Honesty of the raters	3.173554	1.038249	-0.174	-0.86396	0.533768	0.724786
Bias of the raters	3.487603	0.940883	-0.574	-0.63207	0.588969	0.754979
Raters' understanding of the process	3.545455	0.930949	-0.79626	0.154994	0.688408	0.673949
Consistent participation from raters	3.809917	0.799104	-1.03737	0.892324	0.670046	0.674113

Based on the above, it was hypothesized that, there was no significant difference between the average importance levels, assigned by the respondents, to the variables, for overall 360-degree feedback process. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed that, the F value (F = 3.148) was more than the F critical value (F Critical = 1.795), for the variables, for overall 360-degree feedback process. Hence, it was concluded that, significant difference existed between average importance levels assigned to the variables, for overall 360-degree feedback process, by the respondents. Thus, null Hypothesis 1₀ was rejected.

Further, it was investigated whether significant differences existed between average importance levels assigned by the respondents to the variables, for each of the five Factors, proposed above. T-Test found that T value was more than T Critical value (T = 2.46, T Critical = 1.65) for the Factor 4 'Anonymity'. Also, T-Test found that T value was more than T Critical value (T = 2.37, T Critical = 1.65) for the Factor 5 'Rater's role'. Therefore, there existed significant differences existed between average importance levels assigned by the respondents to the variables for 'Anonymity' and 'Raters' role'.

It was also hypothesized that, there was no significant sector-wise difference between the average importance levels, assigned by the respondents, to the variables, for overall 360-degree feedback process. ANOVA of Sector-specific data revealed that, F value (F = 4.914) was more than the F critical value (F Critical = 2.539), for the variables, for overall 360-degree feedback process. Hence, it was concluded that, there existed significant sector-wise differences between the average importance level assigned by the respondents, to the variables for the overall 360-degree feedback process. Thus, null hypothesis 2₀ was rejected.

Further investigation of sector-specific data revealed that, F value (F = 10.978) was more than the F critical value (F Critical = 3.478), for the variables, for Factor 1 'Process ownership'. Hence, it was concluded that, there existed significant sector-wise differences between the average importance level assigned by the respondents, to the variables for 'Process ownership'.

It was also hypothesized that, there was no significant gender-specific difference between the average importance levels, assigned by the respondents, for overall 360-degree feedback process. T-Test of data, based on gender specificity, revealed that, T value (T = 1.128) is less than T Critical Value (T critical = 1.722). Hence, it was concluded that, there was no significant gender-wise differences between average importance levels assigned by the respondents, to the variables for overall 360-degree feedback. Thus, null hypothesis 3₀ was retained.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present paper recorded the analysis of data collected from two studies. In the first study, investigation was made to see whether all the twelve variables could be considered for investigating the perception of the managers on 360-degree feedback. Based on the result, all the variables were retained and same was used for the final study, for further analysis.

Descriptive statistics revealed that, the respondents assigned more or less positive opinion (scores were more than 3 in a scale of 5) towards almost all the variables, under each factor. The study also recorded the negative skewness, for all the variables. One might derive that, though the common average perception of the respondents were positive about the variables, there were respondents, who were somewhat

less positive about the variables. This was an interesting finding, as one might assume that, though the respondents had differences in their perception on the issues related to 360-degree feedback, they forwarded socially acceptable responses, for the purpose of the study.

Data analysis also revealed that, above-mentioned twelve variables could be grouped under five factors, namely, Process ownership, Feedback process, Confidentiality, Anonymity, and, Raters' role.

Significant difference existed between the average importance levels assigned to the variables, for the overall 360-degree feedback process, by the respondents. Thus, the respondents' perception about the variables for 360-degree feedback varied significantly. Further analysis found that, significant difference existed between average importance levels assigned to the variables under Factor 'Anonymity' and 'Rater's role', by the respondents. This might be due to the fact that, both the factors were internal to the organizations. Thus, issues, such as, organizational culture, organizational political equations, relationship among the employees, informal communication networks, formal and informal power relationship, might have played vital roles in shaping the perception of the respondents on the process of 360-degree appraisal.

Further, an attempt was made to study the sector-specific differences in the average importance levels given by the respondents. Analysis revealed that, significant sector-specific differences existed in the average importance level assigned to the variables, for the 360-degree feedback process, by the respondents. Thus, the respondents' perception, belonged to different sectors, about the variables for 360-degree feedback, varied significantly. Analysis also found that, significant sector-specific difference existed between the average importance levels assigned to the variables under Factor 'Process ownership, by the respondents. This might be due to the reason that, the respondents worked in different sectors. Certain sectors, for example, IT sector, Banking Sector and Retail Sector had different type of reporting relationships. In IT sector, depending on the nature of the task (product development, coding, programming, etc.), employees had to report to more than one manager (dual reporting relationship), and thus, process ownership might be complicated, while providing the 360-degree feedback. On the contrary, organizations in the Banking sector, had a clear organizational structure, and reporting relationship, resulting into a much more defined process ownership.

Finally, it was found that, gender wise, there was no significant difference between average importance levels

assigned by the respondents to the variables for the overall 360-degree feedback process. Thus, there was no gender-specific difference in the respondents' perception, about the variables for 360-degree feedback process. This was, again, an interesting finding and might summon further study to investigate whether this was a result of socially acceptable behaviour.

Based on the research findings, stated earlier, one may assume that, overall, middle-level managers have positive perception towards the 360-degree feedback process. However, HR Departments in organizations need to conduct in-depth employee opinion survey to investigate whether the managers really feel this way, or, they have forwarded socially acceptable responses. Considering this, special attention must be paid towards five factors, namely, Process ownership, Feedback process, Confidentiality, Anonymity, and, Raters' role, as identified and investigated in the present study. Also, HR Departments of the respective companies need to look into the respective company's culture (parameters, such as politics, structure, communication), by using certain techniques, such as 'organizational culture audit' and 'organizational culture fit', to identify why respondents feel significantly different way for the Anonymity' and 'Rater's role', as revealed in the present study. Also, keeping in mind the result from the present study, HR departments may propose a cross-sectoral study to understand the differences in the sector-specific differential practices, in the context of the 360-degree feedback. Doing so, special attention is to be given by the HR Departments to investigate their respective companies' reporting relationships and nature of the task.

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