

# 360 Problem Solver

Almost every organisation has experience of 360 Feedback: inevitably some of us have encountered a few problems. Here's our guide to understanding common difficulties, and what to do about them.

The Problem Solver uses linked PowerPoint slides. Click on the links in red to follow a diagnostic sequence, ending in practical recommendations. Or, to browse, press any key for the next page of ideas and advice.

We would appreciate your help developing this free resource. Please tell us about problems it does not address, advice which could be more helpful, bugs, etc... Thank you.

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▶ **Questionnaire Issues**

Lengthy questionnaires, problem ratings scales, relevance, etc...

▶ **Report Problems**

Complicated, inconclusive, criticised reports. Confidentiality problems.

▶ **HR Factors**

Organisational readiness, limited impact, appraisal, leader development

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# Questionnaire Issues

Academic research suggests the design of your 360 questionnaire is critical. A questionnaire which is long, ambiguous, or simply irrelevant produces problems which only become apparent, often when people complain about their reports.

But, difficulties with questionnaires are usually quick and inexpensive to fix. They just need a little specialist know-how.

Please click on the links in red for advice on long, inappropriate and incomplete questionnaires. And, see the rating link if your scale might be a problem.

- ▶ [Takes too long to complete](#)
- ▶ [People say it is not really relevant](#)
- ▶ [Omits competencies/values](#)
- ▶ [Rating scale doesn't work well](#)

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# Questionnaire

## Takes too long to complete

- Today's managers are really busy; they often want a questionnaire which can be completed in 10 minutes. And, that means a questionnaire with 25 pertinent, concise questions.
- To shorten your questionnaire, you might remove questions which are similar to others, because they generate very similar feedback. For example, *"Gives people clear direction"* probably duplicates *"Makes it plain what has to be achieved"*.
- You could remove questions which almost always generate positive, favourable feedback. You might take the view they add little value. An obvious example might be *"Works within the law"*.
- You could simplify long questions which contain several words – they take more time to answer. For example, *"Ensures the competences and capabilities of individuals within his/her team are continuously improving"* is probably too long.

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# Questionnaire

## People say it is not really relevant

- Not every question will be relevant to everyone all the time, so ensure people know they can leave questions unanswered. That might solve your problem.
- You might try demonstrating the relevance of the questionnaire with feedback/coaching for a few influential managers. Success can silence critics.
- If significant parts of the business complain the questionnaire is not relevant, you might try a new, bespoke questionnaire for each part. That's easy to do.
- The best way to create a credible, relevant questionnaire might be to get an influential group of managers to design it. But, use a rigorous design process which checks their assumptions, and develops a concise, well worded questionnaire.
- Piloting a new questionnaire avoids criticism, and it's quick and inexpensive. Doing so might be particularly advantageous if relevance has been challenged.

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# Questionnaire

## Omits competencies/values

- Organisations are constantly changing, so “gaps” are always developing in 360 questionnaires (and in competency frameworks too). It is inevitable!
- In the short term, you might add competencies or values to your questionnaire to provide feedback on the things it omits. Organisations often do that.
- Longer term, you might try to “future proof” your questionnaire by ...
  - Exploring what managers will need to be great at tomorrow, not what made managers successful today.
  - Ensuring your questionnaire is based on a broad range of competences.
- And, it might be important to find a 360 provider who changes questionnaires and reports quickly, and for a modest fee!

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# Questionnaire

## Rating scale doesn't work well

- Everyone has an opinion about rating scales, and every scale has its pros and cons. There's probably no "one size fits all". So...
- If you can, use a scale that is already working well elsewhere, perhaps in your appraisal process, development centres... As a bonus, 360 could then support other HR processes.
- The best scales use concise, plain English definitions. Change anything about the scale that isn't immediately obvious to managers, e.g. "role model", "exemplar".
- Overwhelmingly favourable feedback, and little criticism, is often produced by unchallenging questions, not the rating scale. Try changing the questions, not just the rating scale.
- If none of those seem appropriate, please see "Report Problems"

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# Report Problems

The report is the result of many technical decisions made earlier in the 360 process. And, it is the first output managers get. Unsurprisingly, the report is frequently the most criticised aspect of 360 feedback.

Some of the difficulties with 360 reports are caused by presenting the feedback badly, e.g. with unnecessary complexity. But, other problems result from earlier mistakes, e.g. poor briefing.

So, this section is probably worth reading if you're planning a 360 project.

- ▶ Reports are big/complex/time-consuming
- ▶ Strengths/weaknesses are hard to determine
- ▶ People can work out who gave which feedback
- ▶ All the averages are about the same
- ▶ Lots of favourable feedback - little criticism
- ▶ People challenge the report

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# Report

## Reports are big/complex/time-consuming

- A lengthy feedback report might seem impressive, but can take far too much time. Sometimes the real task with 360 becomes understanding the report, not strengthening personal competence and performance.
- Complex reports often present exactly the same feedback in several ways. You might pilot a basic report, and then add tables and charts only if people actually ask for them.
- Try a report without graphs or statistics; one which presents just the actual ratings given in red-amber-green backgrounds. That's visual and persuasive. In tests people discovered more valuable information in red-amber-green reports. And, and did so much quicker.

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# Report

## Strengths/weaknesses are hard to determine

- Perplexing feedback where it is difficult to be confident about anything is probably result of ambiguous questions being interpreted in different ways. You might rewrite questions containing commas, “and”, “appropriately”, etc...
- Confusing feedback can also be produced by people who don’t know the individual well; they give very different answers. Try clearer, more helpful guidance on who should complete questionnaires.
- There might be a variety of other things which make it’s difficult to decide on strengths/weaknesses; you might take a look at some of the other Report Problem topics.

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# Report

## People can work out who gave which feedback

- Where there's one type of respondent (e.g. one direct report) it might be obvious who said what. A popular workaround is to protect their anonymity by putting them in a category with other people.
- You can also remove any information about who gave which feedback, e.g. take out the "Direct Report", "Colleague"... labels attached to written feedback.
- The red-amber-green report format is hugely popular, but, if people are particularly sensitive about confidentiality, you might replace its visual ratings with averages.
- Averages made up of just one or two people don't of course protect confidentiality. You might need to combine groups to protect confidentiality.
- Individuals giving written feedback might need to be advised on how they could inadvertently disclose their identity.

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# Report

## All the averages are about the same

- A poorly designed questionnaire isn't answered consistently, and that variation generates similar averages. So, the questionnaire is the first thing to check. However...
- An individual's competency averages can be similar where one or more competences contain questions about different aspects of management. For example, where a leadership competency includes both giving direction and developing people. Better competency definitions is a solution, or you simply might not use averages for competencies.
- Averages for direct reports, colleagues, etc... will be the same where people in each group have given a diversity of answers. More care about who completes questionnaires might help. But, a better solution is probably a red-amber-green report which doesn't use averages to show important differences between those who completed questionnaires.

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# Report

## Lots of favourable feedback - little criticism

- Feedback which is overwhelmingly favourable might be welcome, but it doesn't help improve performance much. And, there are often doubts about its accuracy.
- Check who is asked to complete questionnaires, is it just friends?
- If you suspect people are reluctant to be critical, better briefings and stronger assurances about confidentiality might be the answer.
- Your 360 questionnaire might encourage favourable feedback by being too easy - it's questions set a low management standard. For example, "*Makes decisions*" doesn't really set any standard – nothing suggests the decisions made are informed, reasoned, timely...
- And, if your 360 questionnaire is ambiguous or confusing, so people will find it difficult to be critical. An extreme example: it's hard to justify giving a low rating to "*Does not needlessly inhibit the strategic development of the business, subject to appropriate contextual influences*".

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# Report

## People challenge the report

- Initially, ensure that reports are positioned, explained and used. Those important things may not happen if you send the 360 report directly to its individual. It might be much better for a manager or coach to introduce the report.
- If the report is challenged because feedback was allegedly provided by the “wrong people”, get individuals and their managers to agree on who should complete questionnaires at the outset.
- Challenging the report’s relevance, completeness or rating scale almost certainly implies changes to the 360 questionnaire. Please see Questionnaire Issues.
- A report that’s difficult to understand can prompt challenges when people wrongly misinterpret a perplexing report. Please see other Report Problems
- Occasionally, people don’t want 360 Feedback, and criticising the report is a way of disengaging and expressing their feelings. See HR Factors.

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# HR Factors

These links address HR's difficulties and opportunities, with 360 Feedback. It's an area with more than its fair share of doubtful "best practice". For example, accepted wisdom says 360 can't be used in appraisals, but some organisations do so very successfully.

For those who are prepared to innovate and do things carefully, probably anything can be done.

- ▶ Organisation isn't ready for 360
- ▶ Action plans are poor/non-existent
- ▶ Competence and/or performance doesn't improve
- ▶ 360 doesn't improve Appraisals
- ▶ 360 doesn't support Leadership Development

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## Organisation isn't ready for 360

- The following suggestions might also be helpful if your organisation has had a difficult previous experience with 360 Feedback.
- Your organisation will be ready for something - possibly a very simple process, designed with managers, and implemented very carefully.
- A pilot is always a great idea; it builds people's understanding and confidence. Initially you might try a pilot with just two or three influential managers.
- An open meeting which explains 360 feedback, and then asks about people's questions and concerns, always seems to help. Especially, if a few managers contribute with their positive experiences of a 360 pilot.
- And, it might be important to find a 360 provider with considerable experience, credibility and people skills.

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## Action plans are poor/non-existent

- Initially, check that 360 reports contain clear, helpful findings. If they don't, no one can produce a good action plan. See Report Problems.
- Do managers/coaches have a step-by-step process for creating practical action plans? And, can they use it well? If not, a short workshop might be very helpful.
- For a business-focused action planning process you might try...
  - Helping individual decide on a big step change in performance, and the competencies it requires.
  - Using the 360 Feedback to identify key competences which need developing, or utilising, to achieve the step change.
  - Brainstorming several options for developing/utilising key competencies, then (to keep things manageable) selecting the best few options.

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## Competence and/or performance doesn't improve

- If people expect the 360 process to end with the report, then nothing is going to improve. Try repositioning 360 Feedback as performance improvement. You might rebrand/repackage 360 as coaching or leadership development, and never use the “360” label.
- If you're struggling because the Executive don't support and expect improvements, try piloting 360 with a few of them, get them saying positive things in public, put quality controls in place, and publicise your early successes.
- The research on 360 Feedback is conclusive; simply providing people with their feedback reports rarely achieves anything. People might find their reports interesting, and they may promise to make a few changes, but nothing much happens. Only good coaching and action planning consistently delivers competence/performance improvements.

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## 360 doesn't improve Appraisals

- Survey research suggests that previous, positive experience of 360 is irrelevant. What matters is the care with which each particular project is handled.
- The key things seem to be...
  - Explaining things to people, engaging them, listening to them.
  - Managing how many questionnaires are completed in a short time – it could be a big number in the Appraisal period.
  - Training Appraiser's to handle the feedback constructively.
  - Delivering real benefits for individuals (e.g. ensuring Appraisals produces helpful personal development).
- If you are apprehensive you might begin by using 360...
  - A few months/weeks before Appraisals.
  - After Appraisal ratings have been decided, i.e. to explain ratings, not decide ratings.

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## 360 doesn't support Leadership Development

- There are some important reasons for using 360 in leadership development. The 360 experience teaches your leadership model, makes the model personally relevant, highlights development needs, and motivates people.
- Providing 360 reports on a leadership workshop provides the time, expertise and resources to get the most from 360 Feedback. That's a good use of people and resources.
- Providing reports before a workshop prepares people for learning, and saves time on the event.
- Using 360 after workshop provides a review mechanism, and prompts further personal development.
- But, be careful about using an external leadership model; it might undermine the credibility of the value of your competency framework, and maybe introduce some confusion.

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# More ideas/advice/practical help

- We will be pleased to provide impartial, expert and free advice on a difficulty. For example, on a questionnaire, feedback report or workshop which doesn't work as well as it might.  
E-mail us documents, and we provide helpful answers without any attempt to sell to you. That's a promise!
- There is a great deal of useful information in our acclaimed 360 Handbook. Particularly relevant chapters might be those on...
  - Managing Your 360 Feedback Project
  - Managers' Q & As
  - Questionnaire Design
- The Handbook is at [www.NextHR.co.uk/handbook](http://www.NextHR.co.uk/handbook)

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# About Us

Very briefly, we help organisations deliver successful 360 projects. That might involve questionnaire design, launch meetings, online tools, training for managers and/or coaching.

I have worked with more than 30 organisations, and researched and written a great deal on 360 feedback. We have the tools, expertise and innovation to do the difficult things really well.

There's more information about us, our services, and our clients at [www.Next360.co.uk](http://www.Next360.co.uk)

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