Personal Feedback: cases in point

P Kettley

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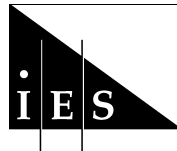**Towing the Line: Helping Managers to Manage People**
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PERSONAL FEEDBACK:
CASES IN POINT.

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Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

Multi-source feedback, often called 360 degree review, is the process by which an individual manager receives personal feedback from more than one source (*eg* subordinates, peers, line manager and customers). The concept behind such feedback schemes is that it provides a more comprehensive assessment of an individual and can be used by them to identify development needs and improve performance.

The growing popularity of multi-source feedback schemes can be attributed to a number of factors. Flatter organisations with multiple reporting lines and larger spans of command are reluctant to rely solely upon the performance appraisal of a single line manager. Multi-source feedback promises 'safety in numbers' and a more objective, balanced view of an individual. They also appear particularly apposite in the wake of initiatives to empower the workforce, promote teamwork, *etc.* More than anything, however, feedback schemes offer a means for reinforcing desired management behaviours. They provide feedback from the source most closely related to an individual manager's primary function, achieving results through people, allowing them to see themselves as others see them.

The study

The research was undertaken because of the rise in interest in 360 degree review, upward appraisal and other multi-source feedback schemes, and because of the relative absence of information about their use in the UK. Given the aggressive marketing of feedback instruments by the proprietary consultants, it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain an objective view of their relative merits and potential pitfalls. The research was funded by

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members of the IES Co-operative Research Programme (CRP), several of whom also participated in the study.

The study examined the practical application of different forms of multi-source feedback in eight case study organisations including: The Post Office, BAA, Mercury Communications, Yorkshire Water, BT, and BP. One financial services employer and a London Borough Council chose not to be named. In each case study, interviews were conducted with the HR function and employees who had participated in the feedback process. In addition, the feedback questionnaires and other supporting documentation were analysed.

Findings

In this summary we pull together some of the key issues to emerge from the research under the following headings:

- content and characteristics of different models of multi-source feedback
- the focus of the feedback and links with other HR processes
- implementation and support
- impact and evaluation.

Content and characteristics of feedback schemes

Most of the case studies initially introduced multi-source feedback for senior managers or other 'high potential' groups of staff. Over half intend for the scheme to be used eventually by all managers with a sufficient number of direct reports. In only one company is the scheme open to all employees.

There is little evidence that any source of feedback is superior to any other, and each source has deficiencies. Very few companies, even those who describe their feedback process as 360 degree, draw on data from the full range of perspectives (subordinates, peers, boss, customers and self-assessment). All the case studies ask the participant to seek the views of their direct reports. All but one also collect feedback from the participant's line manager, and the majority have made it a formal requirement to complete a self-evaluation. The majority actively discourage external customers and clients as sources of personal feedback.

Companies have a choice as to whether to request feedback against a predetermined framework or, alternatively, to be open ended allowing an individual to determine for themselves what to assess. The majority of case studies have opted for the former and use some form of questionnaire to gather feedback. These range in length from 96 items of management behaviour to ten. Users of the instrumented approach perceive two main advantages: by articulating statements of behaviour in the framework, participants are being familiarised with what the organisation values; also, a series of scored items is much easier to analyse than narrative comments. The two case studies who had opted for a more open ended feedback collection process had rejected questionnaires because of concerns about them being too open to misinterpretation, the generated feedback appearing flat and inexpressive and feedback not being grounded in specific situations or relationships.

The majority of the case studies use either the organisations' values or core competences to derive the feedback items. They are specifically limited to how managers exercise their leadership and how effectively they guide, manage and develop their staff. The items or dimensions measured typically cluster around: managing relationships, managing self or personal style, leadership, decision making and developing others.

The way in which results are presented in the feedback report affects how the feedback is internalised and applied. The non-instrumented approaches encourage participants to summarise the feedback they have received however they see fit, and incorporate it into a Personal Development Plan (PDP). Feedback questionnaires, however, provide a range of statistical scores. Reports which highlight the variance between the participants' self rating and that of others simply and clearly, are the most useful.

Feedback as part of the HR system

Half of the case studies use feedback approaches focused upon the future development and potential career of the individual participant. Others are related, with varying degrees of directness to an individual's performance via the performance review and objective setting process. A third model appears to focus away from the individual and their job by focusing on a singular role, usually team leadership. The emphasis is on understanding the

impact of the team leader upon the functioning of the team as a whole, team members indirectly receiving feedback of their own.

Acceptance amongst employees is generally easier when the focus of the feedback is developmental. Participants in feedback schemes linked directly with performance appraisal can be expected to raise more issues, particularly about the validity of the judgements of subordinates. Importantly, the majority of feedback frameworks in the study were competency based. As such they are broader and more complex than ratings of single job-related abilities. Being behaviourally based they are potentially less threatening and perceived as more objective.

Multi-source feedback has complex links with other HR processes and should not be considered in isolation from them. The greatest impact is gained when personal feedback is received as part of a development centre or management development programme. Here, the participant is most likely to receive the time and support to reflect on what they have learnt from the feedback. Multi-source feedback can form an input to both components of performance appraisal: performance planning/objective setting and development review. The traditional appraisal has been used by the line manager to give feedback. So long as ownership of the feedback data rests with the employee, the relationship is reversed. A more bilateral process emerges that moves the appraisal conversation from 'how have you done' to 'how have we done.' Few of the case studies appear com-fortable with making such a transition in style and emphasis. Users of multi-source feedback all anticipate using the results to help determine future training and development initiatives. The creation of a PDP is often the clearest form of access to training courses, project opportunities or further coaching. Some com-panies are making use of aggregate feedback data to highlight the needs of particular target populations, *eg* high potential stream.

Implementation and support

Multi-source feedback cannot be introduced in isolation from other HR goals and processes. Some of the case studies chose to introduce personal feedback as part of an overall strategy to reinforce organisational values, and its launch was given a very high profile. Alternatively, when feedback is to be used as a diagnostic tool at a development centre, its implementation is more low key and incremental.

A major issue of concern was how to win the acceptance of employees as the prospective recipients and providers of feedback. The case studies spoke of waiting until the climate was right before introducing feedback. The main factors for supporting individuals and helping to ensure the feedback loop is closed include:

- the strength of the organisations employee development culture and practice
- access to expert counselling and/or the use of a trained facilitator
- the support of the participants' line managers.

Support should not be restricted to the recipients of feedback; those giving feedback also need training and information.

Ownership, control and confidentiality

It must always be made quite clear who has ownership of the data and what it is to be used for. Similarly, participating in multi-source feedback should never be compulsory. Employees sceptical of its value will quickly resort to the inevitable gaming.

Issues of confidentiality are critical to both the collection of feedback data and the use of the results. Questionnaire based approaches offer anonymity. The success of less structured, more open approaches require a high level of partnership and trust between individuals and the organisation.

Impact

The case studies felt positively that, when introduced as a means of re-enforcing wider cultural changes, personal feedback does help to increase employees' understanding of performance expectations and the importance of self-evaluation and development. Most are also enthusiastic that employees who become proficient in recognising how others see them are more able to tailor their performance to the demands of the organisation. In addition, a direct benefit is that the schemes provide important feedback to otherwise isolated and insulated senior managers. In common with all too many HR initiatives, few of the case studies had attempted any systematic evaluation of the impact of their scheme.

Lessons

- Introducing a formal feedback scheme sends an unmistakable message that skills need to be developed and improved upon in those areas being measured. Feedback frameworks which are too highly structured may restrict the self-knowledge gained by recipients.

- Multi-source feedback schemes are especially suited to measure behaviours related to leadership and interpersonal relations.

- Everyone involved needs to be clear what is being measured. Competency statements can form a pragmatic mix of behaviour, values, skills and knowledge. More information and examples of what a competency means and how to recognise it should always be available.

- Planning for improvement should be built into the feedback process, and participants be made aware of the development options and support available to them via PDPs, mentors *etc.*

- Be clear from the initial design and implementation what the intended outcomes of the feedback scheme are and how they link with other HR processes. Schemes which slide unconsciously from one purpose to another risk undermining the trust of users.

- Careful consideration should be given before integrating multi-source feedback directly with performance appraisal and reward.

- The amount of communication and support required to launch and thereafter maintain the momentum of feedback schemes shouldn't be underestimated.

- Top-down sponsorship and the endorsement of senior management is usually vital. It is often a good idea to pilot the process on a small group of senior managers first.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

This report is about multi-source feedback, the process by which an individual employee, usually a manager, receives personal feedback from more than one source (*eg* subordinates, peers, line manager). Upward appraisal is one variant of multi-source feedback that relies predominantly on ratings from multiple subordinates. Another variant is 360-degree feedback which includes ratings from the key constituencies representing the full circle of relevant viewpoints, as shown in Figure 1.1. Because ratings from multiple sources may not draw from all 360 degrees,

Figure 1.1 : Potential appraisers in a multi-source personal feedback system

immediate manager

'grandparent'

internal 'customers'

manager 'self-appraisal'

peers

external clients *etc.*

subordinates 'upward appraisal'
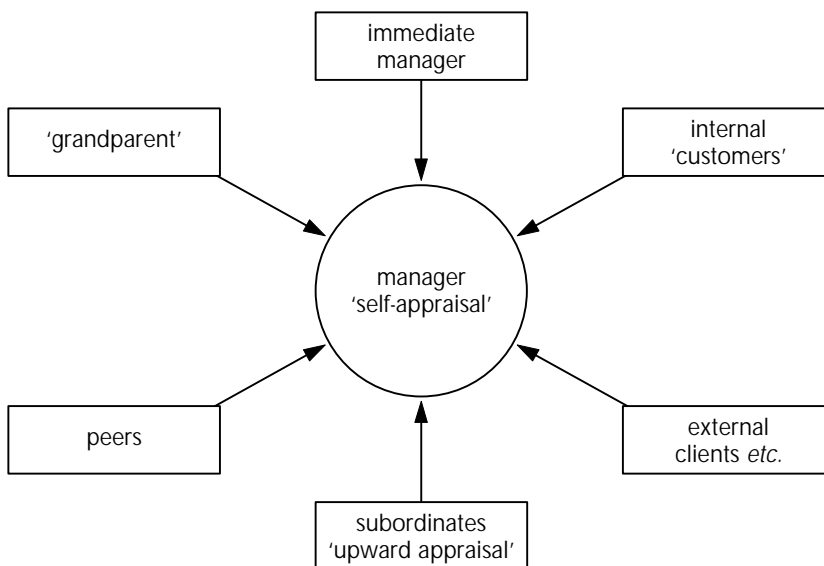
Source: IES, 1996

and because some sources may not be relevant for some employees, we use the term multi-source feedback throughout.

The concept of receiving feedback on aspects of performance from someone other than the immediate line manager is not a new one. The ancient Greeks rewarded poor peer assessment with capital punishment! But the growing popularity of such schemes can be attributed to a number of factors:

- Multi-source feedback appears particularly apposite in the wake of initiatives to empower the workforce, promote teamwork *etc.* — what better way to impress upon employees that their voice really matters than to embody it in an appraisal of their manager?

- In flatter structures with subsequent increases in span of command, multiple reporting lines *etc.*, to rely upon the appraisal of a single line manager is no longer safe. Multiple raters promise safety in numbers and a more reliable, balanced view of the individual.

- Given the importance of the line manager in easing organisational changes, maintaining morale *etc.*, any tool that can help to reinforce good management or leadership behaviour is welcome. As almost every definition of management has to do with achieving results through people, subordinate appraisals provide data from the source most related to their primary function, allowing people to see themselves as others see them.

Despite their timely appeal, multi-source feedback schemes have received comparatively little research attention to date. Given the aggressive marketing of feedback instruments by the proprietary consultants, however, it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain an objective view of the relative merits and potential pitfalls of the different approaches. The major employers which form the IES Co-operative Research Programme (CRP) agreed to fund a small study to examine the experiences of organisations that had implemented a feedback scheme.

1.2 Objectives

The research was undertaken because of the significant rise in interest in 360 degree review, upward appraisal and other personal feedback schemes, and because of the relative absence of information about their use in the UK. Whilst there is an abundance of psychological research on the instruments themselves, there has been very little work relating such schemes to the wider organisational context and other HR processes. The objective of the research was to increase understanding about

the practical application of alternative feedback schemes. Why have employers chosen to adopt the approach they have? Are there lessons to be learnt about pitfalls to avoid? And what factors appear to have influence on the effectiveness of multi-source feedback? The research builds upon previous IES research into approaches to self development, most recently *Personal Development Plans* (Tamkin *et al.*, 1995).

This report is based upon the experiences of eight organisations in both the public and private sector which have been using multi-source feedback. In each of the case studies, we explored the context and purpose of the schemes; the structure and content of the instruments; the processes for giving and receiving feedback, and the amount of support and guidance available to participants; impact and evaluation.

1.3 Methodology

The first stage of the research was to conduct a literature review in order to determine the theoretical basis of multi-source feedback and define the issues for further research.

The next stage was to identify potential case study organisations. All subscribing organisations to the IES plus others known to be active in this field were approached. Some 30 organisations expressed an interest in participating and were contacted to determine exactly what experience of multi-source feedback they had. Not surprisingly, given that such schemes are relative newcomers to the HR agenda, the majority were at an early stage in the scheme's design and implementation. Eight organisations were finally selected on the basis of their business sector, the existence of an established scheme and its purpose or context. In each case study we conducted a semi-structured interview with members of the HR team responsible for the scheme's design and implementation. In order to gauge a range of perceptions, discussion groups were also held wherever possible with employees and managers who were both the recipients of feedback and the providers.

The third and final stage of the research reviewed the documentation supporting the multi-sourced feedback in the eight case studies. We looked at the differences in how organisations support and control the collection of feedback and what dimensions of performance and behaviour were covered. In addition we looked at supporting documentation, *eg* guides and

workbooks on how to interpret the feedback, linkages with the performance appraisal process and so on.

1.4 Literature review

1.4.1 The theory

The giving and receiving of feedback is widely accepted in human resource management theory as a way to improve both employee and organisational performance. The concept of multi-source feedback is itself grounded in the philosophy and practice of performance appraisal, management behaviour and employee involvement.

Having multiple raters may reduce the danger of individual bias which may accompany single-rater appraisal. Grint (1995) in his review of what he finds to be a long and fruitless search for objective appraisals argues that we should replace the subjectivity of a single author appraisal with that of a collective author. The results are less likely to be wholly fabricated. Other writers suggest that when used alongside upward appraisal, it may actually increase the effectiveness of top-down approaches by encouraging a more open and frank dialogue between manager and managed (Beer, 1989). There is also evidence of growing support for the notion that the formal appraisal should serve as no more than a summarisation of the ongoing feedback given regularly and informally.

What has emerged from the research into the role of leader-manager and the expectations associated with that role, is a set of expectations associated with management behaviour and competence that, theoretically, can be observed and monitored (Bennis, 1989; Kotter, 1990). Personal feedback schemes offer an opportunity to gather data from that organisational source most related to the manager's core functions — achieving results through other people (Bernardin, 1986). What is more, a subordinate feedback provides a valuable source of information on the extent to which managers are behaving in accordance with the new 'commitment' and 'empowerment' philosophy and values (*eg* facilitating rather than directing, imparting rather than practising expertise, and developing others to manage themselves) (Gratton and Pearson, 1995).

Alternatively, several authors argue that multi-source feedback is synonymous with other employee involvement initiatives, and

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provides a means to be heard. It should enhance employee perceptions that they play a significant role in influencing HR practices, problem solving, team goals *etc.* (Kaplan, 1984; Walton 1985).

The research on multi-source feedback schemes themselves has been dominated by occupational psychologists and has thus far tended to concentrate on the psychometric properties of the instruments and on inter-rater agreement, leaving the broader organisational implications relatively unexamined (Redman and Snape, 1992). A number of studies do suggest that the various dimensions of managerial performance and behaviour vary in their suitability for multi-source assessment. For example, Mount (1984) found that subordinates are in a better position to rate delegation and work direction, but that superiors are better able to rate such dimensions as know-how, administration and innovation. Managers are more likely to accept subordinate assessment of some managerial characteristics than they are others. A study by McEvoy (1994) asked 330 managers to rate 21 performance dimensions in terms of the degree of accuracy and fairness with which subordinates could make judgements. The pattern apparent in the responses was that interpersonal or 'people oriented' dimensions (leadership, communication, delegation of authority) received higher scores than did task oriented dimensions (*eg* planning, budgeting and decision making). Dimensions which the ratee can vividly portray and which raters can unambiguously understand are likely to be more accurately rated (Christensen, 1974).

Multi-source feedback often includes managers' self-assessment of the same items on which they are rated by others. Self-ratings help focus the manager's attention on the results and build motivation in establishing the direction of self-development efforts (Lane and Herriot, 1990; Meyer 1991). Self-assessment appears to be generally held as a useful vehicle in focusing attention on discrepancies as well as similarities between self and others' perceptions, and identifying gaps in perceptions (London, 1993). Interestingly, women (Wholers *et al.*, 1991) and more successful managers (Furnham, 1994), as measured by their superiors, display lower discrepancies between their own and their subordinates' ratings.

The research literature also indicates that the use of multi-rater schemes is largely restricted to feedback as a basis for individualised management development plans rather than the more contentious areas of pay determination and promotion. The use

of personal feedback approaches for either of the latter purposes greatly reduces the acceptability of the overall process to the appraised manager. A study by London *et al.* (1990) of managers who had participated in upward appraisal found that the majority, some 68 per cent, believed it should be used solely for feedback purposes. Only 28 percent felt it should be used for appraisal and assessment. Purpose may also determine the quality of feedback. Farh *et al.* (1991) found that peers' ratings used for evaluative purposes tended to contain greater halo and be more lenient, less differentiating, less reliable, and less valid than those performed for developmental purposes. There is very little conclusive evidence that feedback sources feel and respond differently depending upon whether they are accountable or anonymous. There is some risk that an upward appraisal procedure in which individuals are accountable for their responses may produce inflated ratings of managers' performance (Antonioni, 1994).

Application of personal feedback

The literature search also revealed material on organisations' experiences of using personal feedback.

More and more employers are adopting feedback schemes. Used by less than 20 per cent of major organisations at the beginning of the decade, current research suggest the approach has been used, in one form or another, in over 90 per cent of Fortune 1,000 firms in the USA (Heisler, 1996). In the UK multi-source feedback is a relatively new arrival. A 1995 survey of the Times Top 1,000 by the Ashridge Management Research Group found only 45 of the 119 respondents had introduced 360 degree feedback (Handy *et al.*, 1996).

There is some reluctance on the part of employers to link personal feedback directly to performance appraisal and/or pay. The 1994 IRS survey of appraisal systems in 94 UK organisations reported that the majority only used assessment of employees by their boss, although in nearly half of cases an element of self-appraisal had been introduced. Only seven organisations used information from subordinates in assessing managers, whilst three included an element of peer appraisal. The Ashridge survey suggests organisations are beginning to use feedback schemes to support more than learning and development. Some 23 per cent of respondents said that they used 360 degree feedback to support appraisal, career and

succession planning issues and six per cent said they linked the process to pay (Handy *et al.*, 1996). Federal Express credit upward appraisal (Survey Feedback Action) as a driving force in their customer service philosophy. Every single employee is surveyed each year on 29 global questions about the company as a whole, ten of which form an appraisal of the person they work for plus a set of optional 'local issues'. Every manager is given a personal score which forms the basis of their development over the next year. Progress is monitored until resolved to the satisfaction of the workgroup (Dignall, 1993). The North Yorkshire College of Health Studies introduced a 'quality of leadership skills' questionnaire into the formal appraisal, resulting in a four-stage interview process: self-assessment by the appraisee; assessment by appraisee's staff; assessment of the appraisee by their line manager; appraisee's assessment of his or her superior, thereby allowing consideration of how the manager's leadership skills have contributed to the appraised member of staff's performance (Nicklin, 1994). The Foreign Office provides a good example of where staff engage in partial upward appraisal. The views of subordinates are not a requirement of FO managers' own assessment process. Rather, staff assessments of management performance are limited to the subordinate's self-appraisal form via questions such as: 'to what extent do you think your line manager helped you achieve your objectives?' (IDS 1994).

The focus of other approaches to multi-source feedback centres less upon the performance of an individual and more about the team as a whole. Rank Xerox, for example, uses annual team member satisfaction surveys aimed at promoting partnership and a shared identification of performance objectives *etc.* BP Exploration embarked upon an upward appraisal scheme in 1990 after having determined to achieve a more open style in the workplace. This style was based on committed teams of people who would engage in open and honest two-way communication to plan and achieve corporate and individual objectives (Willard, 1991). In time BP Exploration found that focusing on the individual team leader alone was insufficient to help secure improvement in team performance. Subsequently the team leader statements have been cut by half and some additional 'whole' team statements added, together with an extra section on customer responsiveness (Hogg, 1995).

The majority of publicised introductions of 360 degree feedback appear reliant upon a highly instrumented approach, *ie* a feedback questionnaire. Interestingly, Fiat chose to supplement the questionnaire with structured interviews with the individual

manager's subordinates conducted by an HR professional. The interviews are indispensable in providing the additional value of explanations and improvement suggestions (Auteri, 1994).

Emerging themes

Personal feedback schemes themselves assume that (a) recipients will be helped to understand better how they are viewed by others (and therefore develop a more accurate sense of goal accomplishment and self-competence), and (b) receiving personal feedback will suggest areas for skill development and performance improvement (Tornow, 1993 in London *et al.,* 1995). Although very little is as yet known about the effectiveness of such schemes in achieving either of the above objectives, existing evidence is very positive. The provision of feedback from multiple sources has been shown to make a significant difference to managers' self-perception and their development needs (Gratton and Pearson, 1995). We were interested in what effect the purpose, and ownership, of personal feedback (*ie* developmental or assessment to inform decisions such as succession) had on its design, usage and impact in the case study organisations.

The literature also raised issues about the validity of including some dimensions of behaviour and performance in a multi-source personal feedback scheme. We were interested to understand more about how organisations are structuring the feedback framework, including the extent to which feedback dimensions are competence based.

We also hoped to explore issues not covered by the literature: the support given to feedback recipients and providers in the process; the roles and responsibilities of senior management, the line and HR experts; and the positioning of feedback schemes *vis à vis* other HR interventions and processes.

1.5 Report structure

This chapter has outlined the methodology used in the study and reviewed the available literature. Chapter 2 presents the findings from the detailed case studies. Chapter 3 summarises the findings of the research and includes the analysis of personal feedback instruments collected. Finally, in Chapter 4 we discuss the wider issues to have emerged and offer some suggested guidelines for practitioners.

2. Case Studies

In this chapter we present the case study reports which provide a fairly detailed look at the use of personal feedback in eight case study companies. Each of the case studies were visited for the first time in the Spring of 1995. Interviews were held with HR specialists responsible for the feedback initiative. In five case studies, discussion groups were held with users (those who had received personal feedback) and participants (those who had provided feedback on their manager/colleague) in the scheme. All of the case studies were re-interviewed by telephone prior to publication of this report in order to update the case study with recent developments. We were able to obtain a blank copy of the feedback instrument and report, from all of the case studies, an analysis of which is given in Chapter 3.

The case studies are each presented in the same way. First comes some background information and reasons for the introduction of the chosen initiative. We then examine the main characteristics of the feedback scheme: its coverage and availability; the design and content of the instrument itself; and the feedback process. Next we explore how the organisation chose to implement the scheme and finally we evaluate the impact the scheme has had.

Case Study 1 : BAA plc

Background

The company began a major culture change programme in 1994 called Sharing the Vision. The programme, designed for all senior managers, emphasises the importance of focusing on the company's mission statement and the management competencies of leadership and self-development. The demands of the desired change upon management were significant. A 360 degree feedback questionnaire called 'Profilor' was introduced as part of training and development. It has become an important lever in developing the desired culture and values. The CEO and senior management committee have all completed the programme and remain highly supportive.

Coverage, content and process

The programme covers the entire management population. So far, some 500 managers, including all corporate directors, have attended. Completing the questionnaire is an integral part of the programme and is, therefore, compulsory to anyone attending.

The feedback instrument is intended to provide clear, useful information about how managers' skills are perceived personally and by colleagues. The individual manager completes one and is provided with a standardised letter requesting feedback from their line manager, at least three peers, and preferably five subordinates.

The questionnaire itself consists of two main sections. In the first, respondents are asked to rate each of 96 descriptions of behaviours using a five-point scale. The second section is completed by the individual and their immediate line manager only. It asks for a rating against a three-point scale of the importance of each of 19 competencies to the person's job. In

addition, there are three questions relating to a summary of the manager's general competence, their long-range advancement potential, and the quality of relationship enjoyed by the respondent.

The confidentiality of respondents' feedback is assured. Completed questionnaires are returned directly for analysis to an independent consultancy, Personnel Decisions Incorporated (PDI). The ratings provided by colleagues and by direct report ratings are combined. If only one manager is responding, however, that person's feedback will be identified.

At the end of each course, participants receive a 31-page computer generated report of the feedback from the 360 questionnaire. Each individual receives a feedback session with one of several internally trained Human Resource staff. The feedback report itself is organised around each of the nineteen skills clustered under nine skills headings as scored by the individual themselves, the manager, direct reports, and colleagues. It gives:

- the relative importance of each skill to the current position
- the extent to which skills are used
- perspective comparisons — average rating from all responses plus norm group
- specific scores for each item showing rating of each type of respondent
- overall performance composite
- highest and lowest ratings in rank order

The final section builds on key strengths, and addresses development needs by highlighting those behaviours rated most important and lowest in skill by self, others, and group norm. The consultant authors, PDI, include a textbook of developmental suggestions automatically generated by computer. These are discussed with the counsellor.

Implementation

HR originally intended to introduce a 360-degree instrument simply as an additional diagnostic tool to the training programme that would provide feedback about managerial performance and work behaviour. During the pilot it caught the attention of the CEO who requested more information. He subsequently

asked that the management committee each undergo the process and debate its potential value. They saw two major attractions. First, the challenges facing the organisation required a fundamental shift in management style and ways of operating. The majority of managers would need support to understand the impact of their behaviours on performance. Secondly, recent internal attitude surveys indicated the need to provide other opportunities for employees to speak up.

Prior to the implementation of the programme, an independent consultant from a major UK business school, seconded to the company, had already worked with the management development team to develop a competency framework of desired behaviours. This was used in selecting a number of 360-degree instruments to pilot. From these pilots they identified PDI who has an established track record in the US and Europe with the Profilor feedback instrument. PDI worked with the company to tailor and adapt the questionnaire to reflect their management competency framework.

Staff were told about the feedback instrument as part and parcel of the employee communications on the Sharing the Vision change programme. The fact that the senior team had been the first to complete the process was used as a positive indicator of its value and the organisation's commitment to it. A member of the senior team acts as a sponsor to each programme.

Impact and evaluation

Resource constraints have prevented HR from undertaking a formal evaluation of the 360-degree feedback process to date, although some preliminary indications of strengths and development needs have emerged and been used in designing further programmes. One is planned at the end of the Sharing the Vision programme in order to determine which elements should be integrated with mainstream personnel and training processes.

Those employees who spoke to us were very positive about Profilor. They found the questionnaire itself to be well structured and quick to complete, although those who had used the original version with 206 questions found it too long. In the small sample interviewed, very few had shared their feedback with others or felt they had received any encouragement to do so. Interviewees agreed, however, that people would be more inclined to continue to support the process if they knew that recipients of feedback were committed to acting upon it.

Managers were unanimous in praising the level of self-insight provided. They found it to give a useful measure of what they would otherwise find hard to articulate as a strength or weakness. Even those who claimed not to have had any surprises, found the confirmation of their performance, as seen through others eyes, valuable. The support of a counsellor in interpreting what some felt to be a rather overcomplicated feedback report was seen as vital. Few managers had elected to create an explicit development plan, preferring to keep their new-found self-knowledge in their heads. However, as the programme has continued, more emphasis has been put on the importance of sharing the feedback with respondents and advice given on how to go about it. Similarly, more emphasis is put on the need to personally formalise a development plan using the evidence from Profilor as one of the inputs.

HR have continued to make small modifications to the design of the questionnaire. Additional guidance on how to use the 'not applicable' score was provided once it became clear people sometimes felt obliged to give score those items they had no experience of the participant doing.

The feedback instrument is intended to be used in an entirely positive way to support managers in making realistic plans for their future development. As such it was designed as a closed exercise with one-to-one confidential feedback, with copies of the questionnaire and results being destroyed. Some members of HR, however, believe that the organisation underestimated the power of a process which has become increasingly important as a driver of culture change. There are now pressures emerging to open up the process. Ongoing improvements to the performance management system are now embracing some aspects of the 360 feedback process. Performance appraisal to date has been entirely target driven, and there is now a perceived need to include other behavioural criteria. In the interim, individuals are being encouraged to use their feedback reports as part of their appraisal discussion with their manager. A list of the same skills areas as appear in the 360 instrument is included with the appraisal to prompt the discussion.

In addition, HR are at a preliminary stage of reviewing the possible use of the biodata available from the questionnaires. Analysing the results by, for example, an individual's function or length of service may help to build up an organisational view of managers' strengths and weaknesses. This would, they believe, expose any self-delusion that they have managers of a certain

kind. At the same time, there is an initiative to develop a succession planning system with an inventory of top management skills and strengths. Clearly, an individual's Profilor report would be a valuable addition to such an inventory. However, at this stage, HR is concerned to avoid any misunderstandings about how and why Profilor was introduced, *ie* for individual development. This was the 'contract' with all managers who took part and its use in a wider context would clearly need to be discussed and explained. HR does recognise, as do most managers who took part, the value of using the data in a wider context, and this is likely to be a further development.

Case Study 2 : Post Office Group Headquarters

Background

In the late 1980s the organisation was looking forward to a period of dramatic change and as yet unknown challenges. Senior managers in the Post Office concluded that achieving the stated mission and values would require strong leadership throughout the organisation. In 1991 they adopted a Leadership Charter that sets out the behaviours expected of managers under four main headings: vision; commitment; management approach and communication. Following development and a successful trial in Royal Mail (the biggest of the main Businesses), upward feedback for managers — called Effective Leadership Feedback (ELF) — was introduced in 1993 into Group HQ as a way of informing team leaders how their teams see them in terms of the Leadership Charter.

Coverage, content and process

The top team were the first to complete ELF, as a demonstrable commitment to the process. It is open to any leader of a team, but in practice has been taken up by the top three levels of management. ELF is designed to be cascaded down the line, with senior management team leaders inviting their direct reports to complete one, and so on.

Referred to as an improvement process, ELF involves the whole team from the start. All attend a leadership workshop with the objective of developing a common understanding of how the ELF works and what it is intended to achieve. Through a mix of exercises and group work, participants consider what leadership is, explore the role of the team leader, and learn how to give constructive feedback. At the end of the workshop the team

receives a questionnaire. Respondents are asked to indicate to what extent they agree or disagree on a four point scale with 30 statements of leadership behaviour, *eg* 'encourages a climate of openness and trust'. The team leader receives a similar questionnaire for self-assessment. Questionnaires are returned directly to the internal consultants who analyse the feedback, and respondents are assured of the confidentiality of the process.

The process designers wanted to provide feedback in a way that would enable team leaders to identify their own relative strengths and weaknesses. They elected to keep it simple, with a short report which gives, for each one of the 30 stated behaviours, the average score together with the number of respondents answering that question. The scores are given in table and bar chart format with a summary of relative strengths and weaknesses. Each team leader receives a workbook on how to interpret the feedback and develop an improvement plan around suggested actions. They then have the opportunity to attend a leaders' workshop with their peers designed to clarify any issues raised, provide mutual support, and help the team leader to decide how to share the results with their team. In practice few managers have taken this stage up, preferring to go straight to a review with their actual team. It is a continuous process which requires the team leader to fix a date for the next cycle of questionnaires and improvement activities every six months.

Implementation

Implementation of the Leadership Charter had been patchy, with areas of the organisation actively embracing the concept and active resistance coming from others. Similarly, the launch of ELF met with varying degrees of success.

It quickly became clear that many team leaders needed support interpreting their feedback, sharing it with their team and devising improvement actions. Facilitators were consequently developed to carry out this support role in addition to their day to day responsibilities. Internal facilitators were chosen in preference to using external professional counsellors, primarily because of their availability at short notice, and familiarity with organisational culture and practice, *etc.* Each has received a one day workshop at which they role-played situations likely to occur, *eg* the uncommunicative boss, and practised resolutions. A network of facilitators continue to meet to share experiences and reinforce learning.

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Impact and evaluation

Both the Charter and ELF have encouraged teams to discuss different aspects of leadership and many team leaders have been given valuable insight into how they could improve their own style and the performance of the team. Employees we spoke to had generally found that the ELF process had helped them to get to know their manager and understand his role better. Most believed relationships within the team to have improved as a result.

The company has a strong total quality culture characterised by regular reviews of all initiatives. A review carried out over the Autumn of 1994 identified that there was a degree of dissatisfaction with the lack of concrete action plans emerging from ELF, and the missing links with the Reviewing Performance and Development (RPD) process. This dissatisfaction was also seen as representing a lost opportunity for providing recognition to teams, since in some cases they were unable to observe direct improvement actions being implemented as a result of their feedback. With this in mind the Group Management Partnership asked all teams and team leaders to co-operate in implementing a slightly more formal approach to ELF. As from 1st April 1995 the creation of Personal Action Plans became mandatory, as did a review of these plans, within the context of the RPD process. This has been reinforced by asking all managers using the ELF process to add leadership to their permanent accountabilities. Team leaders are not obliged to reveal their ELF feedback to their line manager. Rather, they need to show they have taken sufficient actions to maintain their leadership accountability. Whilst the organisation has no wish to devise a new mechanism they do expect to make improvements as they are needed. There are, for example, well established plans to bring the ELF feedback framework in line with recently defined management capabilities and competencies.

Case Study 3 : Mercury Communications

Background

Mercury's philosophy towards managing employees is to devolve responsibility, encouraging people to take ownership of issues and resolve them. The company believes this will enable them to make giant leaps in achieving customer satisfaction and enhance business performance. In 1994, in order to support new ways of working, the company replaced its traditional performance review system with a collection of planning and review tools using the umbrella title 'Contribution Management'. It is a radical approach stressing employee ownership of the system. It is forward looking and uses a diverse selection of core and supplementary review tools. It is intended as a central part of the day to day relationship between managers and employees. There is no direct link with the review of pay. As part of this 'portfolio' approach, employees can, with the help of their manager, design the most appropriate review method for them and choose to use 360 degree feedback.

In addition, and managed separately, 360 degree feedback is used in two other ways. Firstly, it has been part of senior management assessment which informs key resourcing decisions, succession planning and development planning. Secondly, and more recently, it is used as a key component of a self-insight workshop, itself part of a career development programme called QUEST. The content and rationale of each of the 360 instruments differ significantly, and for the purposes of this research we focused on its use within Contribution Management.

Coverage, content and process

There are two tools for reviewing performance. Both require the feedback of more than the employee's immediate line manager, and are optional.

The first called the Virtual Team Member Review (VTMR) relates specifically to those employees working as part of a cross functional team who come together to tackle a specific project. A team member may ask another to complete a VTMR at the end of a project. Evidence and examples are requested for each of the following headings: contribution of specialist skills/ knowledge; communication; delivery of agreed inputs; ownership of team goals; support to team members; enthusiasm and creativity. A form is completed by the individual summarising the feedback for signature by the person providing the feedback. The summary is fed into the contribution management review discussion with the individual's line manager.

The second tool, called 360 Degree Feedback, is designed to enable an individual to get direct feedback from the range of people they deal with, whether they are their manager, their peers, team members, reports or customers. It is available to all employees. They are encouraged to use it at any time but particularly when drawing up their performance contract for the coming year with their line manager. Should they wish to use it, the 360 feedback also provides information for the creation of a Personal Development Plan for which a separate process exists.

There are three stages to using the tool. First the individual is provided with a feedback planner. With this they decide who can give relevant and valuable feedback. They then check that these people are willing to do so and agree the list with their manager. The role of the manager in this process is to help ensure the individual has taken care to identify those who can contribute the most constructive information. Once respondents have been agreed they are each given a feedback form to complete. This involves listing three examples of strengths and three examples of things that could be done better. These forms are confidential and are only seen by the individual and the people filling them in. Individuals are encouraged to discuss the feedback face to face but some prefer to do it by telephone, or simply via the forms. Finally, when all the feedback has been collected, the individual is asked to review it and complete a summary form which asks them to agree those areas they wish to exploit or develop. The individual's manager sees only this summary.

Implementation

Giving and receiving feedback is seen within the company as fundamental to performance improvement and self-development. Training and development programmes emphasise its

importance. What HR felt was needed was an open process which gave people the opportunity to seek feedback in a more formal sense. Subsequently both the VTMR and 360 degree feedback were introduced as an integral part of the launch of Contribution Management. In addition, the process was explained in an internal employee magazine and all employees had the opportunity to attend a workshop and/or a team briefing. Line managers and their local human resources function received training aimed at ensuring they fully understood the process, could implement it locally and answer any queries *etc.* Together they then ran a team briefing on the process and how to use the documents. This included the use of various exercises to give people the opportunity to practice giving effective feedback.

Impact and evaluation

External consultants undertook an evaluation of Contribution Management after the first round. They conducted a telephone survey of approximately 200 randomly selected employees. Generally they gave very positive feedback about the degree of choice, ease of use and the openness of the process. Initially some employees have found the degree of choice and number of forms rather daunting, and found themselves taking some time in selecting those most relevant to them. Not surprisingly, the process is felt to be more time consuming.

There has been no formal evaluation of either of the feedback elements to date. There continues to be a high level of uptake on the optional elements of Contribution Management such as 360 degree, as measured via the number of forms requested from HR. The Virtual Team Member Review (VTMR) is popular with senior line managers who find it gives a valuable insight into the contribution of their direct reports to projects and activities with which they themselves have little contact. It is, however, applicable to a very small proportion of the workforce.

It is accepted that the quality of feedback given and the ability of recipients to interpret and act upon it, varies widely. Respondents are filling in an almost blank piece of paper with the feedback of their choice. One perceived benefit is that each time feedback is requested the individual receives fresh insights. Employees generally like the fact they can use their own words to give direct feedback tied to a particular situation or relationship that both the giver and receiver understand. Some employees are in practice choosing to refer to lists of desired

behaviours generated as part of particular development programmes to help articulate feedback.

HR is cautiously optimistic that the 360 feedback tool is fit for purpose — a practical improvement tool, easy to use, low cost and open to everyone. It has become an established building block in the creation of a self development culture and as such the company intend to retain it in its current format for some time. There is, however, a need for constant reinforcement of 'why' and 'how' giving and receiving open and honest feedback aids performance.

Case Study 4 : Financial Services

Background

At the beginning of 1994 this organisation set out four key values for its employees. These stated a belief in: achieving a constructive relationship between employee contributions and reward; recognising the role of personal job satisfaction in commitment and motivation; providing opportunities and encouragement for career development; and promoting an open but candid and sympathetic working environment. Management style was felt to be crucial in determining the extent to which these values exist for employees. Upward feedback was introduced as a means for an individual manager to determine how well he or she is delivering the values, and provide them with information useful to them personally for future performance planning and development.

Coverage, content and process

All managers throughout the company were asked to begin the initiative, and request feedback from their direct reports by the end of 1994. Managers seek feedback from their direct reports either at a regular meeting or one that has been specially arranged. Managers are then asked to develop an action plan to address issues raised concerning the unit or their personal development. This should then be discussed with their own line manager when discussing their personal and performance development during the appraisal meeting. Managers are not required to share the detailed feedback with their own manager, and it is recommended that specific feedback is kept confidential to the two parties involved.

The process is a relatively informal, face to face discussion initiated by the manager, where direct reports are invited to give feedback on the support they receive and on management

style. The discussions focus on whatever is of most value to those taking part. However, a framework is provided to help structure the feedback. There are four suggested areas for discussion, based on the four core values, with prompts to help direct reports to consider those behaviours of their managers which might reasonably be associated with demonstrating a belief in the core value. For example, given the value 'providing opportunities and encouragement for career development', raters are asked to consider questions such as: does your manager listen to your aspirations? To what degree does your manager meet and support your needs? Does your manager coach you? *etc.* This framework is given to direct reports and they are encouraged to agree with their manager areas to be covered, in advance of the feedback meeting.

The feedback is confidential to the recipient. The company feel strongly that the process should not be in any way part of a 'Big Brother' culture where the feedback given is recorded. Formal written exchanges are not felt to be consistent with the aim of positively developing working relations in an atmosphere of mutual trust. It is also a voluntary process on the part of direct reports. Where staff are unwilling to provide feedback it is suggested that managers explore the source of their discomfort and discuss with them ways in which this can be overcome.

Implementation

The company chose not to try and integrate upward feedback directly into the annual appraisal process. There are several appraisal schemes in operation throughout the business which take place at different time of the year. The process could most easily be introduced using regular informal meetings between managers and their staff. A launch based on a common brief rather than a drip-feed approach was favoured.

The company anticipated some apprehension on the part of both managers and employees. Manager's concerns were allayed by stressing that it is not an upward 'appraisal' process, *ie* it is not an opportunity for staff to rate, assess or judge the performance of their manager in measurable terms, and there is no link between the feedback received and an individual's reward. Comprehensive question and answer papers were provided for managers to brief their staff. Managers were advised to pay particular attention to any concerns on the part of their direct reports as to their reaction to feedback, and to

convince them there would be no recrimination. Similarly, warnings were given up front that, done badly, the feedback process would create defensiveness and tension. In order to help ensure that the benefits were realised, guidelines on giving and receiving feedback were issued to both recipient and provider for discussion before any meeting.

Impact and evaluation

There are two ways in which the upward feedback initiative is being monitored:

- The annual staff opinion survey asks staff (a) whether they have been invited to provide upward feedback in the previous year by their manager, and (b) whether they elected to take up the invitation.
- In the formal annual appraisal meeting, managers are requested to check that their managerial reports have offered upward feedback to their staff.

Early indications are encouraging.

Case Study 5 : British Telecommunications plc

Background

BT has experienced almost continuous restructuring and reorganisation in recent years. Changing management behaviour has become as important as changing the structure. So much so that a basic aim of the most recent change programmes is to create a more flexible, imaginative and entrepreneurial management culture. In 1992/93, 360 degree feedback was introduced as an integral part of a three-day management development programme called 'Leading through Teamwork'. Over time the original instrument has been subject to continuous improvement and now provides an important input to ongoing performance management and development.

Coverage, content and process

All managers are encouraged — and the Top 150 required — to initiate the process and obtain up to date personal feedback for use in performance and development. Participants request feedback from six direct reports or, if they have fewer than six, from other reports or peers who would be in a position to give feedback. Significantly, the company has chosen not to include the line manager in the process. The primary aim of the feedback is to provide the recipient with data for discussion with their line manager during the ongoing performance and development cycle. Participants are encouraged to seek out their line manager's perceptions and feedback as part of regular one-to-one discussions.

The company believes that confidentiality is critical to ensuring honest feedback. Completed questionnaires are returned directly to an independent consultancy for confidential collating. Only one copy of the report is produced and sent directly to the individual participant. Assurances are given that the biodata

collected on the questionnaires are used for future aggregate analysis purposes only and not to identify individuals.

The personal feedback report is a fundamental component of the Performance and Development Framework and is structured specifically to help familiarise managers with the required competency profiles. Individuals are encouraged to bring the report and/or the emergent development action plan to the annual personal development review meeting with their line manager. They are also encouraged to share the plan with their colleagues who provided feedback.

The feedback report itself summarises perceptions about how the participating manager performs, identifying strengths, development needs and gaps between their own and others' perception. It provides a bar chart of self and colleagues' actual and average rating for each of the competency clusters. There are written notes with advice to pay particular attention to variations between different colleagues' perceptions, and between self-assessed ratings and those of colleagues. The final sections provide an opportunity to note their strengths and development needs and to prepare for their personal development review.

Implementation

In total over 30,000 managers completed 360 degree feedback as part of the original development programme. The questionnaire was originally constructed around the five Values: *ie* we put customers first, we work as one team *etc.* After the first phase was completed the exercise was reviewed. Subsequently, the process was renamed a Personal Feedback Report (PFR) and the questionnaire rewritten around the company's then competency framework. In 1995 the competency framework for senior managers, called the Senior Executive Profile, was revised. To coincide with the introduction of these new competencies a personal feedback questionnaire and report based on the Profile was launched. Every senior executive received a letter plus pack of information and guidance on the process and its objectives.

Earlier versions of the feedback instrument measured both relevance to the job as well as performance, and included within the report a table of critical issues, *ie* those rated as significantly high importance and low performance. The new feedback process has been simplified to collect ratings of performance only. The relevance of the competencies on which the feedback framework is based had already been validated.

A prime concern remains ensuring individuals have sufficient support to interpret the feedback they receive. Originally, an event manager for each of the development programmes was available to help respondents interpret their feedback report. Subsequently a network of coaches have been developed to assist individual participants in the interpretation of feedback and the creation of development actions *etc.* To date very few have been contacted. A written guide to working with feedback has been produced for all managers.

Impact and evaluation

The company has conducted an evaluation of the Personal Feedback concept (and of the consultancy who designed and administered the instrument) to contribute to overall policy decisions. Structured telephone interviews were conducted with two groups of managers: a seven per cent sample of managers who had received a report in the previous year, and a matched sample of those who had not yet requested a report. Respondents showed a high receptivity to working with personal feedback and wanted to see it continue. The process was rated as competent in helping participants to understand better their personal development needs. However, two-thirds said it produced no surprises, but rather confirmed and reinforced what they already know about themselves. The evaluation also highlighted the importance of top-down sponsorship and line manager influence on take-up.

Aggregate data is used to measure senior management performance in the Corporate Scorecard, specifically as a measure of the objective 'to demonstrate proactive leadership through visible actions and behaviours'. It is also used to assist in the interpretation of the annual attitude survey results and to inform the design of corporate development and learning programmes. An independent consultant has been sponsored to undertake a PhD on the results of the feedback process. This involves aggregating the data to investigate to what extent aspects of management behaviour are atypical or culturally rooted.

Personal feedback processes are believed to be having significant impact upon individual and organisational learning. There is now a perceived need to find a cheaper, simpler process if 360 feedback is to be cascaded to other levels in the organisation. Respondents to the survey, however, said they liked the confidentiality of the process and many were wary of moving to a more informal and less structured method of giving and

receiving feedback. The HR function see their next challenge as how to embed giving and receiving feedback into the lifeblood of the organisation, without compromising the confidentiality they believe employees still want.

Case Study 6 : British Petroleum

Background

BP studied the challenges facing its business at the end of the 1980s and concluded that in order to survive, the organisation would have to become flatter, less bureaucratic with greater cross-boundary co-operation. Achieving such change was clearly not without its challenges. In particular, the transition to new organisational structures involving a greater degree of team-working required more appropriate, 'empowering' management style and practices. Upward feedback was introduced as one of a number of initiatives to support the desired changes in leadership behaviour.

Coverage, content and process

Upward feedback is so-called because it is a process by which team leaders receive feedback from their team on key leadership practices and behaviour. Feedback is collected via a question-naire and responses are anonymous. The data are analysed by an external consultant and the results fed back to the team leader via a written report. The feedback results are then shared with the team to check understanding of the data and involve everyone in identifying opportunities for improvement and an action plan.

The exact items and dimensions of behaviour and practice on which feedback is requested vary from business to business, reflecting the relative importance of core competencies in each context. As one example of a variety of approaches, team members in BP's headquarters are asked to rate 20 aspects of their team leader's practice such as: recognising and sharing success, effectively resolving conflicts, keeping team members well informed, *etc.* They do so firstly in terms of the frequency of achievement and secondly, its importance to their own

performance, using a five point scale. In addition there is an opportunity to reply to three open questions: 'what would you like your team leader to continue doing/start doing/stop doing because it increases/impairs your effectiveness'. Replies to these narrative questions are typed by the external consultant and presented back to the team leader anonymously but unedited in order to ensure none of the meaning is lost. The guidelines for completion clearly state that the responses will be used word for word to avoid misunderstanding. Many people nonetheless opt for wording that may identify themselves.

The feedback report itself contains the following:

- Importance bar charts indicating for each practice how important team members think the practice is, compared to how important the leader considers it to be. All team results are averaged.

- Achievement bar charts showing the degree to which the team considers the leader to achieve each practice compared with the self-assessment.

- A team response range chart which shows the degree of consistency of views of the team on a five point scale, for both importance and achievement responses, for each practice.

- A 'need for change' listing which shows all practices listed in sequence according to the gap between the relative importance and the score for achievement of each practice. It highlights possible areas for discussion at the team meeting, based on the magnitude of the gaps and groupings of the practices.

It is left to the individual team leader whether they wish to share selectively and discuss the results of the upward feedback with their own line manager as part of the annual performance review process.

Implementation

Upward feedback was introduced as a process to be used by all managers with direct reports. Participation was not enforced or monitored, but strongly encouraged via senior management commitment. Its introduction coincided with changes to the performance appraisal system. The traditional appraisal was considered to be a chore to be avoided, that was essentially done to you as a means for deciding rewards and punishments. The revised process emphasised an approach where the individual would be able to fully participate in a conversation of far more value, reviewing both the previous period's performance but,

more importantly, the focus for the future and development needed. The revised appraisal process encouraged seeking feedback and continual learning about self-improvement *etc.*

There was initially some concern amongst managers about the process. Their fears were allayed by the consistent message given through all briefings that the process was not designed as a means for identifying weaknesses or development needs of the individual manager, but rather one to explore opportunities to promote teamworking and hence the performance of the team as a whole. The organisation has also emphasised the fact that this was upward feedback and not upward appraisal.

External facilitators and coaches were available for all teams completing the process for the first time. They were generally very well regarded and trusted by participants. Partly on the grounds of cost, and also because of a desire to transfer some of their expertise, the company then trained up over 30 employees from across the business to be part-time facilitators. The facilitator meets with the team leader to discuss their initial reaction to the feedback they have received. With the support of a written workbook, the facilitator ensures the team leader prepares for the meeting with their team, in such a way as they will be able to understand the real meaning of the feedback and seek out improvement opportunities. The facilitator will also attend the team meeting to ensure everyone who wants to has a chance to contribute to the development of an action plan. The team leader can also use them after the meeting for a debrief, and to help plan further work with the team.

Impact and evaluation

No formal evaluation of the scheme has been conducted to date. However, indications of impact regularly emerge from the internal facilitator's informal network. They observe, for example, that some teams have completed the process only once or twice. A minority of these have failed to commit to the process, reflecting poor team/boss relationships. Many more, however, are believed to have found the process useful in highlighting areas for improvement which have been actioned, and see no value in repeating it regularly.

Other lessons learnt include the importance of being clear about the purpose of the process to both team leaders and subordinates, and that the team meeting is vital to being able to understand

and internalise the feedback data. Upward feedback would not have worked in the more secretive and controlling culture of the mid 1980s. There is a general belief that the process has helped to promote an organisational culture supportive of teamworking and personal and professional development.

Some teams have felt better able to extend the process into one of team feedback where, in addition to providing feedback to their team leader, individual team members rate the behaviours of themselves as a team. This includes an option for the team to obtain feedback from their customers and suppliers, both inside and outside the company.

The concept of receiving personal feedback from others has been enthusiastically embraced by senior management. Consequently the HR function are currently evaluating a pilot 360 degree feedback scheme for high potential senior managers.

Case Study 7 : Yorkshire Water plc

Background

The changing demands upon the business since privatisation have brought with them a need for an updated style of management. To this end the company has been running development centres for those with senior management potential since early 1990. Approximately 95 managers have attended such centres since that time. The completion of a 360 degree feedback questionnaire is an integral part of the centre which culminates in the creation of a Personal Development Plan (PDP).

Coverage, content and process

Each manager on the development centre completes a questionnaire as a self-assessment. In addition, a questionnaire is distributed by the participating manager to five of his/her peers, five subordinates and five more senior managers. The selection of who is to give feedback is the participants' decision. Anyone can be asked, provided that they meet the criteria in the guidance given: *ie* it is someone with whom they have regular contact and a meaningful working relationship. In an organisation that has experienced significant change including radical restructuring, it was seen as very important that participants felt able to approach whoever would give feedback most likely to be valuable to them. A number of managers have chosen to include ex-employers and even ex-clients.

Each of the completed questionnaires is returned confidentially to an independent external consultant who undertakes the computer processing of questionnaires, statistical analysis and production of the feedback report.

The questionnaire itself contains 36 management practices, each of which clusters under one of four values expected of the

company's managers. They are: communicates in all directions; displays and encourages a confident attitude; recognises the contribution people make; and trusts and empowers people. Each of the practices are rated on two scales. The first asks against a four point scale how important it is to do this practise well in relation to the effect on colleagues' performance. The second asks for an assessment of performance against a six point scale — labelled 'outstanding' through to 'a serious concern'.

Participating managers receive a report that is a compilation and comparison of their self-ratings with those of their colleagues, subordinates *etc.* It includes an overview of ratings for the Core Values, together with a more detailed analysis of the individual practices which make up that value. A visual comparison of the distribution of self and average colleagues' ratings is given in the form of two scattergrams which can be overlaid. An Alignment Matrix — for importance and performance — is included to help gauge correlation and identify priorities for development. All 36 items are listed in order of their importance, with the mean rating for both self and other sources alongside. The actual frequency of response is also given for each item.

Each manager has a development centre tutor who helps interpret the feedback and 'fix' their development needs in the form of a PDP. The PDP is then presented to a panel of senior managers selected for their ability to help ensure development needs are met. On returning, participants are encouraged to share their feedback again with their immediate boss and an internal HR specialist. All those completing a feedback questionnaire receive written guidelines.

Implementation

Implementation of the development centres was fairly low key, given that only a minority of the organisation's staff were likely to have any direct involvement. The initiative did have the full support and clear commitment of the most senior management, many of whom have acted as panel members on the programme.

Prior to confirming a place on the development centre, the individual manager meets with an internal HR development specialist and their line manager. This provides an opportunity to discuss the content and objectives of the centre, including the feedback questionnaire. Care is taken at this stage to remove any concerns or queries participants may have.

Impact and evaluation

A survey has been completed of senior managers who have attended a development centre, to gauge their views of its effectiveness. They were asked how helpful they perceived the feedback questionnaire to have been in terms of providing an assessment of their work performance and a comparison with their own self-assessment. Forty-two per cent of respondents said it was very helpful and forty-four per cent said it had been helpful.

The 360 feedback process had clearly been very well received amongst the managers we interviewed, the majority of whom said they believed they had attempted to change or reinforce aspects of their behaviour as a result. The latest version of the feedback questionnaire includes an opportunity for respondents to give narrative comments and examples to back up their 'scores'. Those who had received them found the edited comments provided by the external consultant to be very beneficial in understanding and interpreting the real meaning of their feedback.

Overall the company believes the feedback process has been instrumental in developing a management style more in line with the demands of the business, amongst managers, many of whom are professional engineers, and who have previously had little opportunity to reflect upon the impact of their behaviour on others.

On the back of the scheme's success, a feedback questionnaire has now been incorporated into a new employee development programme for more junior managers in Water Services, the largest business unit.

Case Study 8 : London Borough Council

Background

Since 1988 the organisation has undergone one of the most radical programmes of change of attitudes, structures and systems in local government. A staff attitude survey conducted in 1993 confirmed that restructuring and the uncertainties of compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) had undermined staff confidence and morale. In response, the organisation sought to demonstrate its commitment to employee motivation and involvement. The Case 8 Management Style was launched as a means of defining the key behaviours and qualities expected of all managers across the Council. Over time a number of local personal feedback initiatives have grown up around this framework. One of the most influential has been the Management Style Audit.

Coverage, content and process

In 1995 The Corporate Services Division (as was) sought to benchmark its managers against the statement of Management Style. A 360 degree feedback process was identified as the best means to complete what was referred to as the Management Style Audit. A primary purpose of the feedback scheme is to provide managers with a valuable tool to help evaluate their particular development needs and managerial strengths. In addition, however, the results are used to establish Division-wide development needs and through this, arrive at the best ways of meeting these needs.

All managers are required to participate in the Style Audit. There are no formal guidelines on who a participating manager should seek feedback from. As a minimum they are expected to ask their own manager, three or more of their peers and direct reports, and complete a self-assessment. Participants are not

anticipated to request feedback from external customers or contractors at this stage.

The feedback questionnaire is based upon the seven clusters of the Case 8 Management Style: leadership, respect, participation, empowerment, communication, development and environment. There are fifty separate items or dimensions of behaviour or management quality, of which raters are asked to assess the frequency, using a five point scale (*eg* my manager rarely/ sometimes/regularly/always displays this behaviour, or don't know). In addition respondents are asked to provide narrative comment for each item as well as the numerical 'score'. Statements that are as factual and descriptive as possible, citing tangible events, are requested in order to allow the recipient manager the best chance of making sense of the feedback. Respondents are also invited to indicate using a +/− column whether or not the manager has improved or got worse on the item in question over the last six months.

Respondents can choose to make their contributions anonymously. They are encouraged, however, to be honest and to give specific examples of situations in which they observed their manager's behaviour. In order to ensure confidentiality, all questionnaires are returned to an independent consultant for analysis.

Implementation

The highly devolved structure of the Council precluded any corporate launch of a personal feedback process. Central HR have adopted a consultative role, encouraging divisions to experiment and implement schemes most appropriate to their needs. It is hoped that the Management Style Audit will become the standard process, but its take-up will vary significantly depending upon the local culture of the division or unit. The Education Inspection Unit, for example, has for some time had a simple one page feedback sheet used by senior managers to collect views on a range of aspects, including their own performance and behaviour, as well as attitudes towards the Unit generally. The results are shared by the manager with their team and an action plan of improvements created.

The launch of the Management Style included a 'tool kit' of training materials including video case studies and a self-assessment questionnaire. Training material on giving and

receiving feedback was also introduced and made available to all staff. Given that the climate was still one of uncertainty and insecurity, the organisation was very keen to ensure managers and employees believed its aims to be positive and developmental. All communications with managers and employees stressed that the feedback process was not to be used as a way of judging or criticising managers. Nor was it to be linked in any way to performance related pay decisions.

Impact and evaluation

Personal feedback has raised awareness and understanding about what kinds of behaviours and qualities are required by the organisation. It is too early to say whether or not the process has led to them being adopted. Certainly, ongoing revisions to the performance management systems suggest that it has led to greater recognition of behaviours managers previously found difficult to articulate. Senior HR staff believe that it has been influential in helping the organisation to maintain a balance between the pressures for hard nosed, 'macho' commercialism and a more participative culture.

3. Main Findings

In this chapter we draw together the main findings to emerge from our analysis of the case study material presented above. The findings are organised as follows:

- The content and characteristics of the feedback scheme itself: coverage of the scheme, who the sources of data are, the focus and links with other HR processes, the structure of the framework used to gather data, the type of behaviours and other dimensions covered, and how the information gathered is reported as feedback.
- Process issues arising from the management of the scheme and its implementation: how initiatives are implemented and supported and by whom.
- Evaluating the impact of personal feedback upon the organisation.

3.1 Content and characteristics of the feedback scheme

3.1.1 Feedback for whom, by whom?

All but two of the case studies have had schemes in place for over two years. Many have changed the detail of the feedback instrument or process over time.

The coverage of the feedback scheme varies. Over half of the case studies intend their scheme eventually to be used by all managers with a sufficient number of direct reports. Two have targeted what they call their 'high potential' group. In only one company is personal feedback open to all of their 7,000 employees.

The research literature was clear that there is little evidence that any one source of feedback is superior to any other, and that each source has deficiencies. We asked the case studies which

rating sources they used. Several of the case studies use the term '360 degree feedback' to describe their feedback process, thereby implying that it draws on data from the full range of perspectives (subordinates, peers, boss, customers and self-assessment). The term can be misleading. Table 3.1 gives the raters or sources used by the case studies. All request that the individual seek the views of their direct reports or other subordinates. Three companies rely almost entirely on this upward appraisal as the feedback source, as a means of furthering team building etc. One of the three has recently extended the process to include a second round of data gathering from the individual recipients' peers. Only one organisation has chosen to exclude the individual's line manager from completing a questionnaire, on the basis that they have developed the annual performance appraisal to structure the boss's views. Given the nature of the feedback process, self- evaluation will happen naturally. The majority of the case studies have, however, made it a formal requirement of the process to complete a self-evaluation. In most cases this is done via a tailored version of the questionnaire completed by other sources. In each case individuals provide a self-assessment of different aspects of their job performance and behaviour relative to one another. There is no self-appraisal comparative to other job holders.

Most of the schemes in this study actively discourage external customers and clients as sources of personal feedback. Fearing that it is the organisation that would be assessed, not the individual, they preferred to use other vehicles such as customer satisfaction surveys, 'silent shopping', *etc.* Two companies allow participants to include customer data when it is appropriate, for

Table 3.1 : Alternative raters and sources of feedback

Feedback Source	Case Studies							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Self-assessment	✓		✓		✓		✓	✓
Boss/line manager	✓		✓				✓	✓
Peers	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
Subordinates	✓	✓	?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
External customer			?					?

NB: ? indicates source is optional

Source: IES, 1996

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example where parts of the organisation have recently been outsourced. One of them supplies a form with particular dimensions on which to seek feedback, the other requires them to use the standard questionnaire.

There is more consistency about the number of raters asked to provide feedback. Each of the case studies asked between five and twelve others. Most provide little guidance on who to ask, other than to specify the number per source type (*eg* three peers, three direct reports) and that it is someone who is familiar with and/or dependent upon their performance. They are mainly optimistic about the integrity of users avoiding choosing friends *etc.* One case study requires recipients to agree the feedback providers with their own manager who will also discuss possible areas of performance to be explored.

3.1.2 Focus and links with other HR processes

We expected to find case study companies to have different objectives for their scheme. Table 3.1 summarises the focus of the personal feedback in each company and the major links made with other HR processes. Three main models of multi-source feedback emerge from their experience:

1. As a diagnostic tool to support **personal development** by helping participants explore different perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses and understand the impact of their behaviour on others and on individual's development needs. Here the feedback process is typically conducted either as part of an assessment/ development centre or as an integral element to a management training programme. This type of scheme is most likely to be a one-off designed for a target group, *eg* high potentials. Once interpreted, the feedback is typically used by the individual to create a Personal Development Plan (PDP) or used as an input to discussions with their line manager about training and develop-ment needs. The feedback data is typically confidential to the individual participant. However, the data gathered can be used in aggregate to build a profile of the organisation's manage-ment capability and inform training and development strategy. One of the case studies was using the feedback scheme as a vehicle for completing a management skills audit.

2. As part of performance review, *ie* a means for gathering a wider **appraisal** of an individual's performance. The focus of the feed-back scheme emphasises the need of the organisation to gain a more objective view of performance. Individual participants are expected to demonstrate performance improve-ments as a result

of receiving the feedback. In fact, only two of the case studies currently link multi-source feedback directly with the performance review or appraisal process. In both cases no rating is used to make a comparative assessment of one individual's performance against another. Rather the main intention is simply to improve the quality of the appraisal discussion, *ie* focused on specifics and more 'objective'. In one case the personal feedback is an optional extra in the performance review and its use is subject to the agreement of the individual and their manager. In the other, participation in the scheme is a compulsory element of performance management. Some of the other case studies currently stressing the developmental nature of their scheme intend to integrate it more closely with their performance management system, once the process has been proven and employee trust and acceptance won.

3. The focus of the third group shifts from the identification of an individual's development needs in the broadest sense and onto a particular dimension of their role, such as **leadership** or management of a team. Two of the case studies have developed feedback schemes where the focus is more upon improving relationships and the performance of the team as a whole. Emphasis is placed on the importance of the manager sharing the feedback they have been given with their immediate work group or team, and on establishing an open plan of action. Employee involvement initiatives such as staff attitude surveys are typically then used to monitor changes in staff perceptions of management behaviour.

3.1.3 The feedback framework

Employers have a choice as to whether to request feedback against a predetermined framework, or alternatively, to be more open ended allowing an individual to determine for themselves what to say (Figure 3.1).

The majority of case studies have opted for the former and use some form of questionnaire to gather feedback. These range in length from some 96 items of management behaviour to ten. Those who have chosen the instrumented option perceive two main advantages. First, by articulating statements of behaviour participants are being familiarised with those aspects of management style *etc.* that the organisation values. Second, a series of scored items is far easier to analyse. This was particularly important to those who wished to create a management norm and/or generate a corporate profile.

Figure 3.1 : Structured and open ended approaches to feedback collection

Structured
ie by competencies

Importance 1 : 4 Scale	This person:	Performance 1 : 5 Scale
Low 1 2 3 4 High	is easy to talk to	Low 1 2 3 4 5 High
1 2 3 4	helps to reduce uncertainty when things change	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4	delegates work effectively	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4	agrees clear objectives with measures and targets	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4	promotes teamwork	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4	considers others feelings when making decisions	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4	is aware of current issues	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4	asserts own ideas and persuades others	1 2 3 4 5

Name of appraisee: .... Dept: ....

Giver of feedback: .... Receiver:...............................

List here 3 specific examples of things I do well:

Example 1

Example 2

Example 3

List here 3 specific examples of things I should do better:

Example 1

Example 2

Example 3

Open ended
Individual raters to determine for themselves what feedback to give

Source: IES

Of the two case studies which have opted for a more open process, one asks participants to document three things the individual does particularly well and three they could improve upon. A form for the feedback collection and for interpretation/ action planning is provided. The other case study provides guidance on questions to consider, linked to the organisation's stated values. There is explicitly no requirement for any written exchanges. Both had rejected a structured instrument because of concerns with questionnaires being too open to misinterpretation, the generated feedback appearing flat and inexpressive and, most importantly, not being grounded in a particular situation and/or relationship. Significantly the scheme in these organisations was in the one case open to all employees and in the other to anyone with direct reports. A framework flexible enough to meet the needs of very diverse roles was therefore required. Neither organisation uses competencies.

Two of the feedback frameworks ask only for a numerical rating of each item. The two non-instrumented processes clearly have narrative only. Of the other case studies, three ask for ratings and offer space for additional comments at the end of the questionnaire. Two of these three prompt by asking questions such as: what would you like your manager to do more/less of? The remaining case study has recently implemented a scheme requiring a numerical rating plus a three line narrative example or comment for every item, as in Figure 3.2

None of the case studies uses field review (the alternative feedback source mentioned in the literature where a personnel specialist interviews sources for feedback on the participant) largely on the basis of cost.

3.1.4 Behaviours, competencies and measures

By definition the non-instrumented approaches to multi-source feedback enable feedback to be given and received on any behaviour or attribute the source and recipient agree. The majority of the structured feedback instruments, however, are based upon statements of core competence or the organisation's values. Given a competency such as 'communicates effectively' the feedback questionnaire may include items such as: 'clearly communicates work objectives', 'avoids giving irrelevant information', 'actively seeks the views of others' *etc.*

Few of the case studies ask for other peoples' observations of a manager's overall achievement in their job. One framework, for

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example, includes items such as, 'produces high quality work', 'is flexible' etc. The majority, however, are specifically limited to how managers exercise their leadership and how effectively they guide, manage and develop their staff. The items or dimensions given typically clustered around managing relationships, managing self or personal style, leadership, decision making, and developing others.

Only two of the case studies already had well established competency frameworks from which to develop personal feedback. Of the remainder, three had only recently defined the competencies, and the feedback scheme was an important part of their launch. Only one case study chose to use an off the shelf psychometric instrument. They spent a long time finding one compatible with their own definitions of desired management behaviour, and tailored it wherever possible.

The case studies using an instrumented approach differed in what they wanted to measure. Two asked participants for their observations of management behaviour rated by **frequency**, *eg* 'my

Figure 3.2 : Including qualitative data into a structured framework

Name of appraisee: .... Dept.:......................................					
	Agree strongly 1	Agree 2	Neither agree nor disagree 3	Disagree 4	Disagree strongly 5
1. Encourages customer focus Brief comment or example	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	....				
2. Provides a clear and exciting vision Brief comment or example	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	....				

Source: IES, 1996

manager does this almost always'. One requested an assessment of **performance** for each item, *eg* 'my manager does this very well'. The others used two rating scales, one for performance and one for rating, **importance** of either of the following: importance to the rater's job, *eg* 'it is critical to my performance that my manager does this well': and importance to the appraised, *eg* 'it is very important in my colleague's job to do this'. Only one company included a section in its feedback questionnaire on future expectation of performance, *eg* 'in this situation my manager would'. This section was dropped from the process following queries from both raters and recipients about its value and purpose.

The more complex the measurements the more sophisticated the analysis needs to be. One of the case studies has simplified the original framework to rate performance only in future. Similarly, the research literature suggested that variable items depending upon the source may increase the instrument's validity. Those case studies which had considered this had rejected it on the grounds of avoiding further complications. One company does restrict a section of its feedback questionnaire to the individual recipient's line manager only.

3.1.6 The feedback report

Interpreting all of the data received into feedback for the recipient is clearly critical to the value of the process. Wider issues of supporting individuals through their feedback interpretation are discussed elsewhere, but the way in which results are presented in the feedback report undoubtedly affects how the results are internalised and applied. The case studies have chosen to collate the data in a variety of ways.

The non-instrumented approaches encourage participants to summarise the feedback they have received however they see fit. For those requiring some structure, both refer participants to a copy of a PDP form. Feedback questionnaires, however, have been subject to computer analysis and provide a range of statistical summaries. We asked managers and employees in the case study companies what aspects of the data presentation had greatest impact and what they found less helpful.

Everyone wants an easy to digest report and the more detailed it is, particularly if the majority of it is expressed in numerical 'scores', the more threatening it appears. Participants in one

scheme receive a thirty-one page report consisting entirely of tables of frequencies. Several of those interviewed found it heavy going and said they relied upon the interpretation and summary of a coach. Far easier to interpret are simple bar charts. Interviewees found it helpful to be able to identify which category of source — boss, peer, subordinate — gave which rating. They queried the value of only giving the average. Reports which highlight the variance between the manager's self rating and that of others simply and clearly are popular. Those frameworks which include dimensions of achievement and importance are able to highlight critical incidents, *ie* those which are rated as critically important to the job but are performed poorly. As one might expect, individuals have different opinions about the use of other more complex visuals, *eg* a spidogram.

Where narrative statements and comments are collected they tend to be reported back to the recipient word for word. This ensures that none of the meaning is lost and is less time consuming for whoever is doing the analysis than editing them. Comments are retyped to ensure anonymity is maintained.

When the feedback is being used in the context of a development centre or training course, the recipients are normally coached through the interpretation of the data by an external 'counsellor' or HR specialist, behind closed doors. Whether the manager then decides to share the results with the feedback providers is typically left up to them. Alternatively, the results can be more openly discussed. The recipient manager can be actively supported, or even required, to use a summary of the results as a prompt for getting a much more complete interpretation with situational examples via a discussion with their own team. A joint plan of improvement might then be created.

3.2 Process issues

3.2.1 Confidentiality

The literature suggested that people respond differently to giving feedback, depending upon whether they do so anonymously or not, and for what purpose. In all but three of the case studies, respondents' feedback is given anonymously and responses are sent directly to an external agency for analysis and presentation to the recipient. This is done largely to reassure respondents they can comment freely with no fear of retribution.

Herein lies a dilemma. Many of the respondents, particularly subordinates, we interviewed said they feel more comfortable knowing they cannot be identified and believe they would have marked more leniently if named. The recipients, however, find the impact of the information greater if they can relate the feedback given to a particular situation or relationship.

This dilemma is avoided in the non-instrumented approaches where there is an assurance of confidentiality, *ie* that the feedback will be known only to the provider and recipient, but the respondents are named and as such are accountable for the feedback they give. Both the companies concerned share a perception that accountable respondents will be better positioned to provide support to the recipient interpreting or attempting to improve upon their 'score'. Participation is entirely voluntary. Managers are encouraged to respect the wishes of any staff who feel unable to provide feedback. It is suggested that they explore the reasons why and perhaps agree a limited feedback agenda concentrating on an area they do feel able to discuss.

3.2.2 Implementation

The HR function had overall responsibility for the implementation of personal feedback in most of the companies. The extent to which the feedback process was performed in-house is largely dependent upon the chosen feedback framework. Instrumented questionnaire based approaches are heavily influenced by the proprietary consultant and their associated costs.

Clearly personal feedback cannot be introduced in isolation from other HR goals and processes. Some of the employers in our study chose to position the introduction of personal feedback as part of an overall strategy for change, such as the overhaul of their performance management systems. Others implemented feedback far more tactically. For example, one case study used a competency based feedback framework to familiarise managers with the competencies they would be appraised against in the following year's performance review.

The visibility of the feedback scheme at launch varied according to its intended purpose. Where the feedback scheme is intended to, for example, reinforce organisational values, its launch was given a high profile. The employee newsletter and team briefings were the most popular forms of communication. Similarly, when personal feedback was being introduced as part of performance

review, efforts were made to ensure all involved employees were familiarised with its objectives and how to use the necessary documentation, via workshops *etc.* Alternatively, when feedback is to be used to diagnose development needs of a targeted population, the implementation of personal feedback is far more low key, being introduced incrementally to individuals as and when they are to use it.

Two of the case studies favoured introducing feedback to the senior management team and cascading down through the organisation level by level. In both, the Chief Executive had taken a personal interest and had ensured the senior team were shown to be committed to the concept by completing it themselves.

Few cases had opted to have a formal pilot, though all had adapted their scheme in the light of experience. The case studies appeared most likely to have piloted where they were assisted by an external consultancy who had proprietary rights to the feedback instrument, often on a trial fee basis.

3.2.3 Supporting individuals

A major issue of concern for all the case studies in our report was how to win the acceptance of employees and managers who were the prospective recipients and providers of personal feedback. In common with many organisations, several of the case studies have undergone significant changes in recent years resulting in restructuring and job loss. Not surprisingly, therefore, some shared a concern that many managers may feel vulnerable about opening themselves up to criticism from a disenchanted workforce. Similarly, they had questioned the willingness of employees who might perceive themselves to be less than secure in their job to provide an honest assessment of their manager. The companies spoke of waiting until the climate was right before introducing personal feedback.

The means used to support individuals depended upon the type and focus of the feedback. Where personal feedback was a component of a development centre or course, participants often had the opportunity to discuss any concerns with an HR specialist running the event, and with their line manager who had often nominated them. Two of the case studies used this initial discussion to establish a coaching relationship between the HR expert and the individual. Alternatively, those organisations which chose to introduce personal feedback to a wider

population had clearly not had sufficient resources to enable everyone to have a one to one discussion about the concept. Obviously the launch of the scheme provided an opportunity to address concerns, but after that the onus was on the individual as to how much energy to give the process. Where the feedback scheme was being cascaded down the organisation, the intention was that an individual's line manager would be sufficiently aware of the process to offer guidance and support. One of the organisations had a telephone helpline for general enquiries staffed by the independent consultants who analysed the questionnaire, and most gave a contact name within HR on the relevant documentation.

Few of the cases had taken steps other than through the written guidelines that accompanied the feedback questionnaire to address the particular concerns of feedback givers. Only two of the cases offered participants training on how to give constructive feedback, although several had such options available as part of their suite of training courses.

Equally important was judging the amount of guidance and support the organisation could offer individuals on how to interpret the feedback they receive. Several of those which had offered individual counselling on receipt of the feedback report, either from an external counsellor or HR expert, are reviewing less costly alternatives. A self-managed workbook, complete with exercises on how to make sense of the feedback and plan and implement a development plan, was one option used by two of the companies. Some of those companies where feedback was introduced as part of a development centre or course encouraged participants to create informal networks, and in one case learning sets, to support one another in taking action upon the self-insight they had gained. In the companies where feedback recipients are obliged to share the results with their team, the support of a facilitator was seen as very important, at least for the first round of the process.

3.2.4 Roles and responsibilities

More than half of the case studies had used an external consultancy to design their feedback scheme, and continued to use them for computer analysis of the data. Only one case study analysed returns in-house, and that was by an internal management services department who are keen to stress their impartiality. Four companies offer participants the opportunity

to use an independent coach or counsellor to help them with interpreting their feedback. However, as coverage of the schemes grows, each is questioning the affordability of this option. Several have already trained up internal coaches. In the two case studies where they have been in existence some time, take-up of their support has been disappointing.

All of the case studies hope to encourage feedback recipients to use it as part of the on-going performance and development cycle involving regular one to ones with their line manager. We might expect therefore that the line manager plays a critical role in the process. Particularly the non-instrumented feedback schemes rely heavily upon the quality of dialogue between an individual and their line manager, with the latter as both source of data and a coach to closing the feedback loop. In one of the companies where multi-source feedback is an element of a development centre, the line manager nominates the participant, and meets with the individual and an HR expert both before and after, to discuss learning objectives and the emerging develop-ment plan. Their role is to ensure all practicable development opportunities are found. Elsewhere the role of the line manager was less than clear. A review in one company found that line manager behaviour had not helped to influence individuals' decisions to take up the feedback scheme.

The two companies which had a formal requirement for team leaders to share their feedback with their team had trained a number of internal facilitators for them to call upon. They played a similar role in each case. Firstly meeting with the team leader to discuss their initial reaction to the feedback they have received, and then helping them to prepare for the team meeting. At the team meeting itself the facilitator would help to ensure everyone felt able to contribute, and that destructive comment is promptly closed down. They are there primarily to ensure that the real meaning of the feedback can be understood, and to obtain improvement suggestions for the team. After the team meeting the leader can elect to use the facilitator to help them develop their action plan, and to plan a meeting with their own boss, or further work with the team. Those interviewed were generally positive about the facilitator role, although many thought it was unnecessary once the team had been through the process a couple of times.

3.3 Impact and evaluation

Few of the companies we spoke to had set formal evaluation criteria for their feedback scheme. Almost all had objectives of a broader nature. For example, that the introduction of personal feedback will reinforce wider cultural change by increasing employee understanding of performance expectations; or that it will encourage greater self-evaluation and development. Several companies anticipated improvements in staff perceptions of management practising organisational values, and intend using the staff attitude survey as a measure of impact upon management behaviour.

Of the measures being used, the following were popular: take-up via requests for feedback documentation; number of completed feedback reports; number of incomplete returns (in one organisation, fifteen per cent were rejected for not submitting sufficient completed questionnaires from self or colleagues); recipient participation in subsequent training and development. Very few case studies had measures for organisational level outcomes *eg* sales and turnover, although one uses aggregate personal feedback as an input to a Balanced Business Scorecard. Several of the companies admitted to being unsure how they would assess the effects of feedback on employee perceptions and outcomes. One which had considered measuring performance ratings before and after receiving feedback, had abandoned the idea after realising that the introduction of the feedback instrument in itself is going to alter how raters interpret the values of the rating scales and/or define the items. Establishing an experimental design (*ie* with a control group together with reliable and valid measures) is not something many companies would feel comfortable to do unsupported. None of the case studies had received offers of such support for evaluation from the consultancies which sold them the feedback instrument.

One organisation in our study had undertaken a formal evaluation of its feedback instrument as part of wider policy review of the personal feedback concept and the strategic way ahead. Telephone interviews were conducted with a seven per cent sample of managers who had received a personal feedback report, and a matched sample of managers who had not yet requested one. Respondent receptivity to working with feedback was high and they gave a clear indication that they wish to see the personal feedback process continuing. Personal feedback was rated as competent in helping respondents understand their

personal development needs and in improving working relationships. Respondents perceived top-down sponsorship to be poor, and few had received the support and influence they wanted from their line management. Another case study organi-sation had commissioned an external survey of staff attitudes to the new performance review system. The results indicate that employees like the choice of review tools. However, employees were not asked specifically about the 360 degree feedback element, nor was the survey used to determine take-up of that option.

Generally, the perceived value of personal feedback amongst companies in the study was high. Managers and employees were also quite positive about the scheme's potential to improve self-understanding and suggest directions for development and performance improvement.

3.4 Summary

This chapter has identified factors drawn from the case studies' experience which appear important to the design and implementation of multi-source feedback. They include:

- the sources of feedback and number of raters
- the intended coverage
- the focus of the feedback, whether it be a diagnostic tool for identifying an individual's development needs, a means for improving team leadership and the capability of the work group as a whole, or as a contributor to the annual performance review process
- the use of feedback frameworks, often based upon competences, to familiarise participants with desired behaviours and performance requirements
- the inclusion of narrative, situationally specific data
- the role of the presentation of the data in supporting feedback interpretation
- positioning the scheme's implementation vis-à-vis other HR initiatives and processes
- the support required by participating individuals, both feedback recipient and provider
- some evidence of the impact of multi-source feedback.

The more general issues that are highlighted by these findings are discussed in the following and final chapter.

4. Issues for Practitioners

Earlier chapters have presented detailed case study information on the variety of forms and usage of personal feedback in case study organisations. In this the final chapter we discuss some of the broader issues to emerge from this study, and clarify some of the unanswered questions requiring further research. We end the chapter with a summary of lessons learnt, which we hope will be of use to those considering the introduction of personal feedback.

We have already seen that no two organisations are the same either in the way they introduce a feedback scheme or in terms of the existing culture and processes into which it links. Although general lessons can be learnt from others' experience, multi-source feedback must always be designed and implemented to take full account of the unique context of the specific organisation.

4.1 Philosophy

4.1.1 Feedback in a self-development culture

The philosophical basis of multi-source feedback lies in the concept of self-evaluation. Where, so the theory goes, there is a discrepancy between the feedback recipient's self-evaluation and the perception of others, the recipient will be prompted to revise their self-evaluation and set goals to improve (London, 1985). All of the case studies claimed to be actively encouraging greater self-development and individual ownership of learning needs, careers *etc.* Each believed that personal feedback from the range of different perspectives will enhance recipients' self-understanding and self-awareness; and that this heightened self-knowing will in turn lead to skill development and performance improvement.

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The self-development culture pursued by the case studies also implies that once an individual has defined their learning need the onus is upon them to select the best means for meeting it. If individuals are to invest the considerable time and energy that such ownership requires, then the learning must be genuinely relevant and important to them. One might assume that the most relevant feedback would be feedback on those aspects of behaviour, performance, attitude *etc.* asked for by the recipient. The majority of organisations in this study, however, have chosen to use a structured feedback framework, of predetermined and generalised items, over which the feedback recipient has little or no influence. Furthermore, the majority of the structured questionnaires focus entirely upon job related skills and behaviour. Only the non-structured instruments enable the individual to seek others' perceptions on any aspect of themselves they wish. Previous IES research on Personal Development Plans (Tamkin *et al.*, 1995) has examined this notion, concluding that that the more tightly organisations define the arena for development the less likely they are to engage the enthusiasm and commitment of the learner.

Employers should be aware that introducing a formal feedback system sends an unmistakable message that skills need to be developed, and performance needs to be improved, in those areas that are being measured (Locke and Latham, 1990). Questions are raised as to whether such feedback does in fact facilitate greater self-knowledge, or in fact serves simply to change employees' schema of what behaviours are expected by the organisation from a high performing manager/team leader. In other words multi-source feedback can be used not as a means *for* determining the development needs of self but as a form *of* development in it own right. Section 4.3.1 discusses these issues further.

4.1.2 Ability of individuals to close the feedback loop

Different people are more or less able to close the feedback loop, *ie* to set for themselves goals to reduce discrepancies between their feedback and goal achievement. The research literature suggests that the stronger the ratee's self-image, desire for and willingness to seek feedback, and sensitivity to others' evaluations of them, the more likely they are to act upon feedback. However, a weak self-image, low desire to seek feedback, and low sensitivity to others' perceptions will weaken the tie. Such individual differences emphasise the importance of

providing appropriate support for participants in the feedback process. Merely providing an individual with their ratings in the hope they can interpret and act upon them is unlikely ever to be sufficient. Planning for improvements should be built into the feedback process, *ie* there should be a requirement for a development plan discussion.

Individual differences also raise issues about whether participation should be voluntary or compulsory (see section 4.4.4). In all likelihood, with a well publicised and effective voluntary scheme, a mix of peer pressure and an anticipation of direct benefits (*eg* self-publicity) will ensure a satisfactory level of take-up. Employees and managers alike told us that requiring someone to participate in a feedback process against their wishes is almost always destructive. The consequences of the recipient of feedback not acting upon it can be damaging for people other than the individual. Employees who are led to believe from their brief of the feedback process that their manager will share the results, are understandably frustrated when this does not happen. When the process is intended to run once or more a year, as in some of our case study companies, already poor relationships can be worsened. The role of the facilitator or HR specialist is invaluable here in detecting early on when a feedback scheme is inappropriate, and offer alternative support.

4.2 Feedback as part of the HR system

4.2.1 Focus of the feedback

The previous chapter explored the different focus of approaches to personal feedback in each of the case studies. Some are primarily focused upon the future development, and potentially the career, of the individual recipient. Others are related with varying degrees of directness to an individual's performance review and objective setting process. A third group appear to have directed the focus away from the individual and their job by focusing on a singular role, usually team leadership. The emphasis is on understanding the impact of the team leader upon the functioning of the team as a whole, team members indirectly receiving feedback of their own.

This study was too small to draw firm conclusions about the focus of multi-source feedback and employee response. It would appear however that acceptance amongst employees is generally easier when the focus of the feedback is developmental. People

want to understand their personal development needs, and equate such understanding with greater satisfaction and career development. Participants in feedback schemes linked directly with performance review can be expected to raise more issues about the validity of the judgements of subordinates (see section 4.3.2). Importantly, the majority of feedback frameworks in our study were competency based. As such they are broader and more complex than ratings of single job-related abilities. Because they are behaviourally based they are perhaps less threatening and more objective. Consequently, even when the feedback results form a component of the annual performance review, the competency basis of both implies it is developmentally orientated.

The research literature suggested that people will give a different response according to the purpose to which the feedback information will be put. Employees we interviewed did not always support this assertion. Those who came from a high performance culture, where there was a high familiarity with Total Quality Management concepts, for example, believed they could always give an honest response whether for development or appraisal. Others from companies at an earlier stage in a cultural change felt far from comfortable with giving feedback on their peer or manager that might influence their reward or job selection *etc.* Managers and employees are often unsure whether the feedback process is, for example, solely developmental or not. Whilst they may not be required to share their actual feedback report, they may need to produce a summary at their performance review. Similarly, participants at a development centre are acutely aware that a copy of their report is held by HR, and question assurances that it is not referred to for succession planning *etc.* Confusion about the purpose of personal feedback again raises issues about confidentiality which are discussed in section 4.4.4).

Employers should, therefore, be quite clear what the tool is to be used for from its initial design and implementation. Its focus and content will influence, and in turn be influenced by, other HR processes.

4.2.1 Links with other HR processes

In common with all employee development techniques, personal feedback has complex links with other HR processes and should not be considered in isolation from them. A failing of a study as

small as this one is that it cannot consider the true relationships of cause and effect peculiar to each individual organisation. We can only make some general observations about the likely impact of the links into and out of the feedback process.

We have already seen that a personal feedback report can be generated in a variety of circumstances. The comments of those interviewed suggests that for many people the greatest impact is gained when personal feedback is received as part of a development programme. If this is true there are several possible reasons. It may be, for example, that when the feedback coincides with other feedback they receive concurrently as part of the programme, recipients are better able to make links and see patterns in their behaviour. Certainly, when the feedback process is linked to a development centre or specific programme, it is more likely to require a development or action plan discussion. The individual is in turn most likely to receive the time and support to reflect on what they have learnt from the feedback.

The fact that a personal development plan (PDP) is created is not necessarily an indicator that the feedback process is any more effective. As earlier IES research on PDPs (Tamkin *et al.*, 1995) found there is an expectation that these actions will be followed up, but it is rarely clear how. A suspicion that such plans are not being actioned has led in several of the case studies to calls for stronger links with the organisation's performance management systems.

Performance appraisal can increasingly be seen as breaking down into two parts: a performance planning session that involves reviewing achievement and establishing new objectives; and a development review that looks at the training and development needs of the individual (Fletcher, 1994). Personal feedback can form an input to both. The experience of our case studies suggests, however, that it is most often best placed in a separated development review. This is particularly true if the appraisal is used for making comparisons between people, and perhaps influencing performance related pay (PRP). The review conducted by one of the case studies revealed feedback recipients to be overwhelmingly in favour of continued use of their personal feedback reports, but only as an input to an annual personal development review, a separate but not unrelated process to an annual performance appraisal.

The incorporation of personal feedback into the performance planning part of appraisal would for many organisations require

a significant shift in style and emphasis. The traditional appraisal has been used by the line manager to give feedback. So long as ownership of the data in a personal feedback report rests with the employee, the relationship is reversed, with the employee using the discussion to share feedback with their manager. A more bilateral process emerges that moves the appraisal conversation from 'how have you done' to 'how have we done'. Few organisations appear entirely comfortable with such a transition. The inclusion of feedback processes appears most popular in corporate centre and non-operational roles, where objectives are more fluid and subject to change at short notice. Here managers are attracted by the potential availability of the views of others who have in all probability worked closer to the individual.

Users of multi-source feedback clearly anticipate using the results of their feedback scheme to help determine the focus and content of future training and development initiatives. Again the creation of a personal development or action plan is often the clearest form of access to specific training courses, project opportunities or further coaching. Alternatively, some companies with structured feedback questionnaires are making use of the aggregate data to highlight areas of needs of a particular target population, *eg* high potential stream, top management team, new division or venture.

For others, the raison d'être of introducing a feedback scheme was to act as a form of development in its own right by articulating expectations about behaviour in the desired culture. In addition, positioned carefully, such schemes can help facilitate the introduction of other HR processes. One of the case studies, for example, introduced personal feedback into its management development programme explicitly as a means for familiarising managers with what they will be appraised on in a year's time.

4.3 Scope and content of the feedback instrument

4.3.1 Open or structured framework?

While some employers choose to use a formal questionnaire to elicit feedback, others have adopted an unstructured format. Our research suggests that the major attraction of feedback instruments that contain behavioural/prescriptive items is that they provide specific examples of desired behaviours that can serve as goals. Companies which have determined their organisation's

values, desired competencies and behaviours can use personal feedback to help embed their practice. There is little empirical research evidence to confirm that participants in a feedback process are more likely to encompass the behaviours included in the ratings than those who do not. The comments of those interviewed for this report do support the assumption that because participants are required to consider the dimensions they are using to rate others, and others are using to rate them, important behaviours become salient and schemes are formed and developed. These schemes may in turn influence self-awareness and re-evaluation of self-image. Schemes are not easily changed but they can be reinforced and enhanced by the feedback process.

Given the importance of the items, employers should ensure that the process used to create the instrument is rigorous and has the support of employees. The validity of off the shelf instruments will have been proven for a generalised, often predominantly US, management population. Those seeking to define the behavioural needs specific to their own organisation should not rely on the reliability of an away-day brainstorm by a few senior, and potentially isolated managers. There is some evidence to suggest that impact is greater when employees are involved in the development of the feedback framework by generating the competencies that form the basis for the rating scales (Locke and Latham, 1992).

Specific examples or situational data that enhance credibility are also an area for careful consideration when deciding the framework format. After all, the more credible the feedback the greater its effect on the recipients' effective response to it, and the higher the likelihood of setting goals and subsequently improving performance (Latham, 1993). Participants in the study questioned the value of feedback that is reduced to numerical ratings only, on two main counts. First, in the process of reducing other people's perceptions to numbers, a fair amount of the meaning is lost. A typical item might ask the rater to evaluate a behaviour such as 'involves others in decision making' and has a response set such as: almost never, not often, some of the time, often, always. Without a situational example it is impossible to know whether 'almost always' is good or bad. It may well be an ineffective use of time always to consult with others before making a decision. Second, with a standardised questionnaire the items are general to the managerial population and not specific to the individual in question. Employees and managers we spoke to were keen to have

included qualitative data comprising the sources' actual comments. Those who received numerical ratings only, felt it was necessary to speak directly with sources to fully interpret and understand their feedback. They varied in their willingness to actually do so.

4.3.2 Feedback sources and data validity

Some areas of managers' jobs will be unknown to their peers and most often their subordinates, and consequently should not be evaluated by them. Employees interviewed told us they were happiest providing feedback on areas directly, and uniquely, within their experience (*eg* coaching and developing subordinates, communicating effectively). They were less comfortable 'scoring' their manager on more task or business oriented components of job performance (*eg* planning, resource management, product awareness). Multi-source personal feedback schemes are especially suited to measure behaviours related to leadership and interpersonal relationships. In other words, those aspects generic to many roles, unlike task activities that represent the technical requirements of the particular job.

None of those interviewed volunteered the concern raised in the literature that the honesty of peer ratings is often undermined by competitiveness *etc*. Managers interviewed who participated in schemes emphasising upward feedback from subordinates rather than peers, questioned whether they could find enough peers with whom they had sufficiently frequent contact to rate them on more than a few dimensions of their performance.

This study was too small to explore issues around the reliability of different sources of feedback. All of the case studies' feedback schemes have all sources respond to the same items, with the exception of one. This includes a section for the line manager only, to rate the importance of each competence to the job. From the literature review we expected the perceived credibility of the feedback to be influenced by the extent to which different sources control valued rewards. Anecdotal evidence from the case study interviews confirms that managers pay greater attention to subordinate ratings on items to do with staff management, and line manager data for items having to do with their relationship with their boss *etc.*

Another factor which influences perceptions of the credibility, and hence saliency, of feedback data is the recipient's control

over the element of performance that is the subject of the feedback. Items on reward policy, business strategy, working conditions, and other dimensions of the organisation's performance outside of the direct influence of an individual manager, are better sought via an attitude survey than through a feedback scheme.

4.4 Implementation and support

4.4.1 Launching

Implementation will be influenced by the context into which the feedback process is to be introduced. Is it part of some other well understood structured process such as a development centre? Or is it to form part of a newly revised approach to performance management, for example? In the case of the latter, as with the introduction of PDPs, a programme of communication with employees and managers is needed that covers both the mechanics of how the scheme is to work, and most importantly its rationale and place in any cultural change (Tamkin *et al.,* 1995).

Some of our case studies were also using the introduction of a feedback scheme to launch newly defined competencies and statements of desired behaviour. Employees were particularly reticent about the feedback process when they were not clear how such competencies had been created and by whom. More enthusiastic were those who had been asked to comment on an early draft of the competencies. Employers should consider greater involvement of more employees and managers early in the implementation process.

The amount of communication required firstly to launch and thereafter to maintain the momentum of feedback schemes, should not be underestimated. If the scheme is to be made available on demand, the benefits must be sold to potential participants. An evaluation undertaken by one of the case study organisations revealed that not knowing about the feedback scheme was the main reason given for lack of take-up. The perceived value will be enhanced by being able to show that senior management have completed the process. A second major reason for non-take-up in the evaluation mentioned above, was lack of top-down sponsorship and endorsement from senior management.

4.4.3 Supporting feedback interpretation

We have already discussed how different individuals will need different levels of help in interpreting their feedback and translating it into skill development and performance improvement. Clearly the more the feedback method increases the saliency of the feedback the higher its value. For managers and employees to pay attention to it, take it seriously and learn from it, the scheme must have credibility. We asked the case studies what factors appeared most important in ensuring the impact of their feedback process.

The key factors they identified included several about the content of the report format itself. Recipients find it helpful to be able to see at a glance any discrepancies between their self-evaluation and the perceptions of others. The ratings of all sources should therefore be clear, easily detected, and preferably on the same page of the report. Similarly, including variances is invaluable. It is harder to dismiss feedback when agreement among raters is unanimously high.

Another critical success factor is the strength of the employee development culture and practice. To feel it is safe to admit to weaknesses, even to themselves, managers and employees need to know there is development or training available that can support them in making improvements. When feedback from different sources is inconsistent, recipients may decide this merely reflects the biased perspective of each source, *eg* a workforce with low morale, jealous peers *etc.* rather than their own behaviour. They are more likely to make external attributions for unfavourable feedback when such feedback is not accompanied by, or they are not aware of, clear alternatives.

The case study organisations all saw the role of the line manager as being central to ensuring their feedback scheme worked. This is no surprise, given that a common objective of the feedback schemes themselves was often to reinforce wider changes in management behaviour and greater employee involvement. Companies spoke of the management role having changed from directing and controlling to one of coaching and facilitation; from top-down leadership to team planning and learning *etc.* However empowering this new genre of line manager may be, they alone are unlikely to be able to provide all the support which recipients of multi-source feedback need to interpret and internalise it. Many employees, regardless of the quality of their relationship with their boss, will prefer to

work through their feedback results for the first time with an independent counsellor. Many more managers are unlikely to be effective in such a role. There is strong research evidence that managers are typically weakest at interpersonal empathy (Gratton, 1995). The line manager comes into his own as the person with whom to agree any subsequent development plan. The employees in this study were mainly enthusiastic about the potential of multi-source feedback to raise the quality of their dialogue with their manager at development review or appraisal.

The administrative processes surrounding the feedback scheme must be efficient. The case studies using a feedback questionnaire all had guarantees in place that participants would receive their feedback report usually within two weeks of completing it. Given the high percentage of disappointed participants who failed to submit the required number of questionnaires, a reminder process is well worthwhile.

The value of normative information to individuals attempting to make sense of their feedback and act upon it was questioned by our case studies. Only one of the companies has used comparative feedback. The intention in this case was to help clarify standards and generate competition. Others had opted not to, on the basis that employees may be satisfied to see they meet the performance levels of their peers and fail to establish more challenging goals encouraged by the organisation. Anecdotal evidence from interviewees suggests that the greater the differences between self and others' ratings, the more recipients are concerned about what their colleagues got.

4.4.3 Rater training

Support should not be restricted to the recipients of feedback. The experience of our case studies suggests that it is all too easy to fail to recognise the needs of the sources or raters, *ie* those being asked to give feedback.

Their needs will differ according to the type of feedback process. With structured feedback questionnaires, for example, there is often the assumption that they are so easy to complete that nothing other than written guidance on the documentation itself is necessary. Whilst a cleverly designed questionnaire might be easy to complete, this does not assure the quality, and subsequent usefulness, of responses. The employees interviewed often did not feel that they had had an adequate explanation

about the purpose of the scheme, and had unanswered questions about the confidentiality of the process. In those companies using a non-structured framework, or one where there was significant opportunity for free comment and examples, the sources had more specific concerns about how to give feedback. Support can be provided in a variety of ways. One employer simply ensures they include within the process documentation, positive and negative examples of the company's management competencies for people to refer to if they wish. Users find it helpful in articulating their feedback. Another has introduced a range of material on giving and receiving feedback into its learning resource centre and invites each 'rater' when named to use it.

The sources of feedback will also want to know what they can expect as an outcome from the process. Expectations need to be especially carefully managed when there is a requirement for the recipient, usually a manager or team leader, to share the results with their team. Two of the case studies ensure the manager and their team have completed a half-day workshop together before beginning the process, to establish some ground rules.

4.4.4 Ownership, control and confidentiality

As we have seen, there are some very real doubts about whether participating in personal feedback should ever be compulsory. For a start, enforcing it is impossible. Employees sceptical of its value will resort to the inevitable gaming (*ie* using friends as feedback sources, failing to complete questionnaires adequately *etc.*). Most of the case study organisations, however, strongly encouraged participation of the target group often by linking it, with varying degrees of directness, to other HR processes, particularly the development review element of performance appraisal. Even so, all were keen to stress that ownership of the feedback results resided with the individual. Typically individuals are not obliged to show their feedback but simply to demonstrate feedback has been sought and an action plan created. One of the feedback schemes that requires recipients to share the results with their team does include a question to the team on whether or not the team leader has made the planned improvements since the last round of the process. This is rarely used in practice.

The issue of confidentiality is critical both to the collection of feedback data and the use of the results. Taking issues of

collection first, largely because of the cost implications of the structured questionnaire type of instruments, several of the case studies hoped to move to a less structured, face to face process in the future. For the time being they believed the structure and confidentiality protected those feeling vulnerable to attack and wary of admitting development needs. The companies already pursuing a more open process felt strongly that the success of their feedback scheme, like other employee development initiatives, required partnership and trust. The organisation needed to trust individual participants to behave responsibly and not abuse the process, and individuals to trust the organisation to make available a climate and development opportunities worthy of their investment in time.

Regarding the **use** of personal feedback reports, it must always be made quite clear who has ownership of the data. One option used by the case studies is to ensure that the only copy is that held by the individual recipient. Another option is that a contract is agreed with each participant in advance, agreeing under which circumstances information from the report and any other data from a development centre, for example, will be referred to by the HR function. It is the feedback scheme which slides unconsciously from one purpose to another that risk undermining the trust and involvement of its users.

The type of feedback instrument also influences how much time and energy employers are willing to spend monitoring who has and who has not received personal feedback. The case study organisations using feedback questionnaires analysed by external consultants were very aware of the number of participants, primarily as a means for monitoring cost. Those, on the other hand, who were encouraging the giving and receiving of feedback through a less formalised framework believed that there was little point in attempting to monitor take-up. They felt strongly that it was inappropriate to try and control something which was supposed to signal the giving and receiving of feedback as part of the organisational lifeblood. Better, they thought, to use existing staff attitude surveys to estimate take-up.

4.5 Impact and evaluation

The previous chapter discussed some of the difficulties the case study organisations had with measuring the impact of their scheme. As a result, few had attempted an evaluation other than to identify minor changes to the process. The size and scope of

this study was too small to conduct any independent evaluation, of the effectiveness of personal feedback, but the case study experiences are worth consideration.

The case studies felt positively that, when introduced as a means of re-enforcing wider cultural changes, personal feedback does help to increase employees' understanding of performance expectations and the importance of self-evaluation and development. Most are also enthusiastic that employees who become proficient in recognising how others see them are more able to tailor their performance to the demands of the organisation. In some cases the annual staff attitude survey was starting to signal an improvement in aspects of management performance. In addition, a direct benefit of such schemes is that they provide feedback to managers that would not ordinarily get it, *ie* otherwise isolated and insulated senior management.

The employees and managers interviewed for this research were mainly enthusiastic about multi-source feedback. Those who were less so tended to be users of highly structured questionnaires. They expressed concerns about the validity of the framework, the constraints it imposed, and the lack of value in numerical scores. As a means for enhancing self-awareness, the process is likely to stand a better chance of having an impact if the amount and depth of feedback collected is enhanced to include verbal descriptions along with numerical ratings; collecting data on motivation as well as behaviour and getting a historical perspective.

There is a temptation, given its relative simplicity and the powerful new insights offered, to see multi-rater feedback as a universally good idea and something which can improve a whole range of HR processes. Consequently, organisations can suddenly find a proliferation of feedback tools each designed for a different purpose. In one of the case studies, where there were no less than four schemes relatively widely available, the HR function appeared far more apprehensive about inconsistency, mixed messages *etc.* than employees, whose only complaint was the amount of time needed to complete them for other people.

4.6 Lessons for practitioners

Those considering the introduction of personal feedback into their organisation should consider the following:

- Introducing a formal feedback scheme sends an unmistakable message that skills need to be developed and improved upon in those areas being measured. Feedback frameworks which are too highly structured may restrict the self-knowledge gained by recipients.

- Multi-source feedback schemes are especially suited to measure behaviours related to leadership and interpersonal relations.

- Everyone involved needs to be clear what is being measured. Competency statements can form a pragmatic mix of behaviour, values, skills and knowledge. More information and examples of what a competency means and how to recognise it should always be available.

- Planning for improvement should be built into the feedback process and participants be made aware of the development options and support available to them via PDPs, mentors *etc.*

- Be clear from the initial design and implementation what the intended outcomes of the feedback scheme are, and how they link with other HR processes. Schemes which slide unconsciously from one purpose to another risk undermining the trust of users.

- Careful consideration should be given before integrating multi-source feedback directly with performance appraisal and reward.

- The amount of communication and support required to launch and thereafter maintain the momentum of feedback schemes should not be underestimated.

- Top-down sponsorship and the endorsement of senior management is usually vital. It is often a good idea to pilot the process on a small group of senior managers first.

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