hudson

Multi-Source Feedback

Foundations, challenges and recommendations

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Introduction

Multi-Source Feedback (MSF) or 360-degree feedback refers to a process whereby different observer groups (direct reports, peers, manager(s), and/or customers) provide individuals with feedback on their work behaviours and/or performance. The feedback receivers also rate themselves on those same aspects.

Many MSF tool and platform providers claim that MSF (a) provides feedback receivers with numerous deep and valuable insights into themselves, which lead to positive changes only, and (b) allows organisations to guide their employees towards continuous improvement. However, there are also many questions linked to MSF, and various critical opinion pieces have appeared in the popular media.

MSF has its 'believers' and 'non-believers'. Although scientific research into MSF interventions and their effects has not yet led to conclusive results, it is able to provide us with several guidelines and recommendations, which will be set out in this paper.

Hudson has built up extensive experience in facilitating 360° feedback projects, ranging from individual feedback paths to large-scale (3000+ feedback receivers) feedback processes on an organisation-wide scale.

Over the course of time, we have acquired specialist knowledge in and developed best practices on how feedback processes can best be organised and on the aspects that need to be taken into account in order to guarantee that (a) the feedback survey is administered smoothly, (b) project deadlines and deliverables are met and (c) all survey content and outcomes (i.e. report and feedback sessions) meet the client needs. We are very enthusiastic about using our knowledge and expertise to help you make your 360° Feedback project a success.

1

The Foundations

> 'Leadership is like singing in the shower. You might think you are good at it, but that doesn't matter. What others think matters more.'
>
> — A tweet by John Antonakis,
> Editor in Chief of "Leadership Quaterly"

More observers means a more reliable assessment

Most people who sing in the shower feel that they are doing quite a decent job, but are they really? To what extent can we trust a person's own judgement? We would obviously have a more reliable evaluation of that person's singing skills if there were an audience in the bathroom, made up of several people who could each provide us with their individual assessments. The same applies to the assessment of leaders: placing too much trust in the opinion of only one person is always dangerous. The more eyes evaluating the same behaviour in the same person, the more reliable the assessment will be.

A central characteristic of MSF is that it aggregates the assessments of a higher number of different observers, which is a very powerful method for increasing the reliability of the assessment.

While all observers have their own deficiencies and biases, these tend to cancel one another out when aggregated, which should allow us to have a higher level of confidence in MSF results than if the behaviour were evaluated by one person only.

Multiple observers, multiple perspectives

MSF combines the views of different groups of observers, which all have a different perspective on the performance and behaviour of the feedback receiver. Those different perspectives are all valuable for acquiring insight into the feedback receiver's performance at work. For example, a supervisor might focus mainly on whether the set targets are met, which means that they would rate someone who consistently meets these targets as a very good performer. Direct reports, on the other hand, have first-hand experience of how such targets are met, which is equally valuable information, but not necessarily the sort of information you might expect to get in a traditional performance review based on the perspective of the supervisor alone.

These two very important characteristics of MSF are absent in classical performance reviews and therefore have the potential to make MSF a very valuable tool for organisations. The fact that multiple observers are involved, increases the level of confidence we can have in the evaluations. In addition, MSF offers a view of the same person from different perspectives, which is a great source of information that can be extremely useful for supporting employee development. It also reveals any gaps between (a) how feedback receivers see themselves and how they are seen by others (their blind spots) and (b) the views of different observer groups.

2 The Challenges

It is of importance to keep in mind that Multi-Source Feedback comes with some challenges and pitfalls.

Everybody becomes an assessor, but is everybody up to the job?

MSF interventions require many people to assess their colleagues and help them in their development by providing feedback on their professional behaviour and performance. However, not everybody may be motivated to provide (or even be capable of providing) trustworthy assessments.

The ratings people give are often influenced by biases and other distorting mechanisms:

— **Yeah Saying**
An observed response distortion in MSF is 'yeah-saying', which occurs when a respondent is not really motivated to participate in the evaluation or when they don't want to be 'difficult' by giving negative ratings.

— **Central tendency bias**
Some people show a 'central tendency bias', which means that they do not feel comfortable choosing the more extreme response options and therefore tend to give scores only around the midpoint of the scale.

— **Halo- and Horn effects**
Other examples are the 'Halo' and 'Horn' effects, which occur when the respondent's perception of one single positive (Halo) or negative (Horn) trait is generalised to unrelated areas, thereby causing all ratings to be positive or negative.

Enough care and guidance is essential

Most people have already experienced that the feedback they give to others does not always have the desired effect. Feedback needs to be given under the right circumstances and in the right way; otherwise, you might end up having the opposite effect to what you were aiming for.

MSF can positively affect individual- and organisational-level performance, but this will happen only if the MSF intervention is administered with enough care and guidance for both the respondents and the feedback receivers. It is often very difficult for people to process the negative personal feedback they receive, especially if they were previously unaware of the negative points mentioned in the feedback.

Moreover, in an MSF involving feedback from different sources, the various perspectives might contradict one another, which makes the feedback even harder to process, let alone act on. For these reasons, it is very important for organisations to focus efforts on mitigating any confusion that may arise and to provide sufficient guidance in interpreting the feedback and in planning actions to make a positive change.

3 Recommendations

Regarding the Assessment

Statements

An effective MSF intervention starts with developing clear questions or statements that are unambiguous and easy to rate. These statements should be worded as neutrally as possible and should relate only to behaviour that can be observed by the respondents.

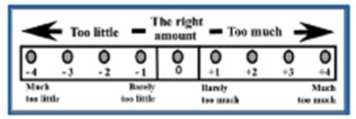
questionnaire should be piloted to verify whether it works as intended or not. This might sound obvious, but developing high-quality MSF statements is not as straightforward as it may seem and often requires quite some expertise and R&D effort.

Respons scale

MSF is often used in an attempt to identify 'skills gaps' between the feedback receiver's current state and their ideal state, i.e. how they would be if they possessed all the skills required for the feedback receiver's role and responsibilities.

How well the MSF helps in uncovering these skills gaps is strongly influenced by the choice of response scale; for example, a classical five-point Likert scale scores behaviour from zero (if the behaviour is not shown at all) to five (if it is shown very often, or very strongly). Therefore, it always assumes that the more frequently a behaviour is shown, the better. Feedback for less than optimal scores can then only be: "Do this more". However, for some surveys and state-
ments, this scale is not the most appropriate. Consider, for example, the behaviour "X consults his/her colleagues before taking a decision". Doing this more is not always better. People could also be consulting their colleagues too often. The extent to which a behaviour should ideally be shown also depends on the context, as it can be required to a greater extent for some roles than for others.

This option of 'overdoing it' is conveniently captured in the 'Too little – Too much' scale (Vergauwe et al., 2017). This novel type of scale does not go from zero to five but has negative and positive scores, with the midpoint zero being the ideal score or 'the sweet spot' that the feedback receiver should be aiming for. A positive score higher than the midpoint means that they are overdoing it (showing too much of the behaviour), while a negative score means that they are not doing it enough.



Using this scale allows skills gaps to be immediately visualised, which can serve as valuable input for development paths. Deviations from 'the right amount' can go in two directions: both overdoing it and underdoing it could be problematic. This type of scale makes it more straightforward to provide actionable feedback: the feedback receiver needs to focus on showing the behaviour either more or less often.

Regarding the feedback

Transparency and Trust

To fully reap the benefits of an MSF intervention, the first thing to keep in mind is that any feedback given should be completely clear to the feedback receiver. However, this can be quite challenging in the context of an MSF where feedback is aggregated over multiple respondents and where different perspectives can contradict one another. For these reasons, it is of the utmost importance that the person discussing the MSF feedback with the feedback receiver (the coach) devotes sufficient attention to ensuring that the receiver fully understands the feedback, where it comes from and what it entails.

Secondly, the feedback should be trustworthy, which means that the MSF procedure should be transparent and reliable. The feedback receiver should believe that the respondents gave honest feedback with the best intentions. This implies that the MSF is conducted in an environment where people trust one another, where anonymity is ensured when required, where everybody involved is completely aware of the 'what' and 'why' of the MSF intervention, and where people are motivated to participate in the procedure.

Lastly, providing someone with feedback can work only when the feedback receiver is open to it. This will depend, to some extent, on the feedback receiver's personality but also on the efforts of the coach or the person discussing the feedback with the feedback receiver. A good coach helps assimilate the feedback and makes concrete developmental recommendations tailored to the feedback receiver's specific personality and attitudes. The biggest mistake that can be made is to send the MSF feedback report to the feedback receiver without any guidance or explanations. This will lead only to feelings of hurt and confusion.

Fit with organisation culture

Before embarking on an MSF intervention, an organisation needs to consider whether an MSF is consistent with its organisational culture. For example, in organisations that foster a dynamic in which people have to compete strongly for recognition, bonuses and promotions, it might not be a good idea to have employees assess one another or to expect them to help one another in reaching development goals. In order to maximise their chances for success when implementing an MSF intervention, organisations should therefore foster a culture that is development-oriented and based on trust.

Clear communication on the goals

All too often, organisations initially claim that the MSF results will be used for development purposes only, but after some time the MSF results are consulted again when promotion decisions need to be made. Doing so will completely undermine employees' trust in the procedure and in the management's agenda.

It is acceptable to use an MSF for promotions or administrative purposes, but only under certain conditions. Most importantly, this should be completely clear to everybody involved from the start of the process. A general guideline therefore is to use MSF interventions only for what was agreed beforehand without deviating from this agreement at a later stage. If the decision was made to implement an MSF, organisations should fully support its goals by making sufficient time, energy and resources available

Conclusion

MSF is a 'high intensity' and 'high cost' intervention. The underpinnings and logic behind MSF are very clear and noble, but the careless application of MSF will do more harm than good and could lead to a decrease in motivation, individual productivity and mutual trust among colleagues.

It is therefore important to devote sufficient resources to the implementation of an MSF. A correct implementation requires much effort, including clear guidance and training of the respondents, the feedback receivers and not least the coaches, who will need to take an active and directive role in interpreting the results and making developmental recommendations to achieve behaviour change. When an organisation does succeed in implementing an MSF intervention correctly, the added value for its people, and consequently also for the organisation itself, can be substantial.

References

Presentation Professor Bart Wille for the Hudson 360° feedback breakfast session – 360° feedback. Fundamenten, uitdagingen en aanbevelingen vanuit de wetenschap (2020). Bart Wille is Assistant Professor Industrial-Organizational Psychology at the Research Group Vocational and Personanel Psychology of the University of Ghent. www.bartwille.org

Vergauwe, J., Wille, B., Hofmans, J., Kaiser, R. B., & De Fruyt, F. (2017). The Too little/Too much scale: A new rating format for detecting curvilinear effects. Organizational Research Methods, 20(3), 518-544.

Multi-Source Feedback at Hudson

A well-thought-out and structured method for creating an overall view of an individual's professional performance, whereby the feedback receiver's behaviour is evaluated by people who have good insight into his or her daily functioning.

An answer to your needs

In partnership with you, we will define the optimal solution for your feedback project, one which fulfils the needs and matches the culture of your organisation.

Gathering **structured feedback** to be used in **performance management**	Making sure your **(future) leaders** are equipped to meet the **organisational challenges of the future**
Providing your employees with a mirror for their **talent development**	Enabling a **feedback culture**

GETTING STARTED

Choosing the Competency Model and type of questionnaire

Standard	Flexible	Tailored
Fixed set of competencies from Hudson's 5+1 Competency Model Hudson's Leadership Potential Model	Your (organisation-specific) selection of competencies from Hudson's 5+1 Competency Model	Your organisation's specifically chosen set of competencies, values and/or behaviours
NEW Leadership questionnaire Unique: 'Too Little-Too Much' answer scale	**Customised questionnaire(s)**	**Tailor-made questionnaire(s)** Defining your content and format in collaboration with Hudson **Client questionnaire(s)**

ROLL OUT

of the feedback project

HUDSON PROJECT MANAGEMENT *Hudson manages the project*	• *Project coordination* • *Feedback receiver and/or HR in the driver's seat* • *Feedback gathering and follow-up* • *Full support from and regular updates by Hudson*
IN-HOUSE PROJECT MANAGEMENT *You manage the project using **Hudson's software platform***	

MOVING FORWARD

Creating self-awareness

Reports	Feedback & feedforward
Standard **individual, aggregated** and **executive** reports or reports **tailored** to your specific needs	By Hudson or In-house • Feedback sessions • Creating Personal Development Plans

My organisation is new at this. What do I do?

Having built up extensive experience in facilitating feedback projects, Hudson is very enthusiastic to use its knowledge and experience to help ensure your feedback project is successful. We provide various workshops, training and advice to support you along the way:

Training & workshops			Branding
Hudson software platform training	Providing high-quality feedback	Advice and support on best practices	Survey(s), report(s) and communication in your branding

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