

whitepaper

Implementation Planning for Multirater Assessment Success

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When multirater assessment programs work as intended, they provide many important benefits—insightful comparisons of how people see themselves relative to how others see them which help point the way to development plans, ability to capture feedback from multiple organizational levels, behavioral input to performance reviews, a means to measure the effectiveness of development programs, etc. But when they don't work, organizations that have implemented multirater systems risk damaging their cultures by diminishing trust, fraying relationships, and, in many cases, enabling bad decisions.

As with many other organizational initiatives, the difference between an effective and ineffective multirater assessment program lies in the quality of the planning that precedes its implementation. This planning process must incorporate several factors, each of which is critical to achieving a program's intended goals and objectives.

These factors include:

- Statement of clear objectives and desired outcomes aligned with business needs.
- Integration of the multirater assessment initiative with other related programs (e.g., performance management, succession planning).

- Establishment of reasonable metrics to measure success.
- Clarifying of roles and responsibilities for implementation and ongoing use.
- Identification of an internal champion with sufficient influence to build widespread support and assure a high level of participation.
- Institutionalization of accountability for follow-through to assure that program objectives drive actions.
- Design of an effective communication plan.
- Use of an evaluation instrument to measure the success of the initiative and provide feedback for continuous improvement.

Stating Clear Objectives and Outcomes

While valuable to an organization, a multirater assessment program can be viewed by some employees as a threat to their job security. The capability of a multirater system to gather honest and direct feedback from multiple people on an individual's job performance can prove intimidating to those who lack confidence in their abilities or are uneasy about their job status. Therefore, besides merely guaranteeing the anonymity and confidentiality of survey responses, and providing honest assurances that data will be used only for appropriate purposes, it is critical to communicate *why* the system is being implemented—what business needs it supports, how individuals can benefit by participating, and how it ultimately will impact the organization.

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For example, a business that has eliminated layers of management to cut operating costs, increase speed to market, and improve customer responsiveness, will want to push responsibility lower in the organization. In this type of environment, employees may be required to adopt new behaviors and, in many cases, develop new or sharpen existing skills. Managers, meanwhile, may need to become more empowering, better at coaching, and more thoughtful and strategic in delegating responsibility. Without seeking input from the people one works with for their perceptions of his or her skills relative to the new job focus, managers would have only their self-assessments to guide them in charting their short- and long-term development. And many times, particularly with the poorest performers, those self-perceptions vary significantly from the perceptions of others.

Integration with Related Programs

A multirater system can support, and should be integrated with multiple programs. This integration can drive the multirater system objectives. One objective might be to provide valid supplemental behavioral data to enrich performance review discussions. Another might be to provide sufficient information to plan the deployment of a training program comprising multiple modules. When good data about one's performance is coupled with a firm understanding of why individual and group development in certain areas is critical to the business, a powerful incentive is provided to take active responsibility for personal development.

Establishing Project Success Metrics

Once objectives have been established, it should be relatively easy to establish the metrics by which implementation success can be measured. These metrics might include percent of the target population using the system; perceived ease of use; satisfaction with the quality and quantity of communication about the program's intent, and the adequacy of training;

percent of users who have completed a development plan and reviewed it with their managers within a prescribed timeframe; or overall perception of the value of the tool.

Examples of longer-term metrics might include whether or not implementation plans have been executed, whether or not data from the multirater assessments have been used in performance reviews and in training deployment decision making, and whether follow-up multirater assessments had been conducted to measure behavior change. Many of these metrics can be collected through the use of follow-up surveys and manager reports.

Clarifying Roles and Responsibilities

The implementation and ongoing use of a multirater program often will involve an external supplier or consulting partner as well as internal managers, Human Resources professionals, and other organizational stakeholders. With so many different people involved, and with many interdependent tasks to be executed, it is of paramount importance that the project plan clearly defines *who* will do *what* and by *when*.

For example, what will be the process for reviewing assessment results? Will there be group feedback sessions? Or one-on-one, face-to-face feedback with a neutral facilitator? Will there be third-party coaching from the consulting organization? And who will users be able to call if they have questions or concerns about system use?

Identifying an Internal Champion

Nothing more effectively ensures the buy-in of organizational stakeholders than having a well-respected, high-profile senior executive personally champion the multirater assessment program. By being personally committed to the program's success, the "internal champion" is a credible spokesperson who has the power to trigger a strong positive emotional response across the organization. To maximize the

impact of the champion's involvement, his or her role should be carefully considered and incorporated into the overall implementation plan, especially with regard to program communication.

Institutionalizing Accountability for Follow-Through

One of the most important issues that must be addressed concerns how to make certain that people who get feedback from the multirater surveys go through the essential follow-up steps. These steps include interpreting their reports, drafting development plans, and meeting with their managers to reach agreement on plan objectives, content, and timing. Equally important is ensuring that managers of feedback recipients understand that they bear responsibility for providing active coaching and making available development resources. While an effective performance management process should have this level of accountability built into it, proper accountability is especially critical to the success of a multirater program. (It is important that a multirater assessment process not be considered a substitute for a performance appraisal, but rather a good source of information to support performance appraisal and management decision making.)

Designing an Effective Communication Plan

The communication plan specifies the message, timing, and tactics to be used to effectively inform target organizational audiences about the initiative. In effective planning, consideration is given not only to the content of the message, but also to such things as the priority of the program relative to other important organizational initiatives that must also be communicated. The plan will specify the appropriate communication vehicles (e-mails, voice mails, department meetings, etc.) as well as who needs to be involved in the process, the timing of key messages and the key contacts who can provide more

information upon request. In addition to the formal communication channels, informal channels (often referred to as "hidden network") also should be considered.

Evaluating Program Success

The evaluation of the success of the program (sometimes called the project post-mortem) should be built into the implementation plan—not as an afterthought, but as an integral component when project metrics are established. Typically, a survey coupled with selective interviewing, and followed by a core implementation team meeting provides a good mix of information from which to reach conclusions about the relative success of the project. This evaluation process also can produce information and feedback that can prove useful in improving of the process.

Keeping the Initiative Vital

When implemented effectively, multirater assessment can be a powerful initiative that can align individual behaviors around organizational values, increase overall organizational effectiveness, improve employee retention, lower the cost of training and development, validate selection systems, and more. To keep the initiative vital, the implementation plan needs to go beyond the launch and the initial rounds of feedback, and provide a long-term view of how the program might change or expand to address future organizational needs.

When organizations try to by-pass the implementation planning process, it often is not only the immediate survey logistics that suffer, but, more significantly, the overall potential impact of the multirater assessment program. Companies that say, "We've done surveys before, and we know how to do them, this is just another survey..." underestimate the negative impact of a poor implementation as well as

the measurable benefits that a strong implementation can provide. This is why conscientious providers of multirater assessment services often will decline to partner with a client that, to reduce costs, insists on bypassing the implementation planning process.

Conclusion

Planning is arguably the single most important component of the multirater program implementation process. With a strong plan, crafted with the input of the right stakeholders, everyone involved knows what needs to be done, who will do it, and when it will be done. The effective plan, leaving as little as possible to chance, gives stakeholders the assurance that if they do what they said they would do, the initiative will be successful.

Organizations that feel that their implementation budgets cannot bear the cost of an implementation planning session should re-examine whether or not they actually can afford to implement the multirater at all, given the potential costs of a poor implementation—which can include lessened employee morale, higher employee and management turnover, and diminished organizational credibility for future such initiatives.

The three key components to the effective rollout of any organizational change initiative—planning, implementing, and evaluating—form a continuous-loop process, with the evaluation of outcomes feeding back to planning for the next round. The initial implementation plan for a multirater assessment program is the foundation upon which success is built. If the plan is weak, the program will produce weak results. If the plan is nonexistent, then the program will likely fail altogether.