

Briefing: 360 degree feedback



WHAT IS 360 DEGREE FEEDBACK?

360 degree feedback is a powerful catalyst for changing behaviours and raising performance.

It provides partners and senior people in a law firm with confidential feedback from colleagues who are in a good position to judge important aspects of their performance. By doing so it can help individuals overcome any blind spots that might otherwise hold back their performance and prevent them from fulfilling their potential.

360 degree feedback usually involves obtaining input from those who report to the individual as well as from peers and more senior people. It can even incorporate feedback from clients and others outside the firm. On the other hand, sometimes it is appropriate to obtain feedback only from fellow partners.

HOW 360 DEGREE FEEDBACK CAN BE BENEFICIAL

360 degree feedback is increasingly being used by forward-thinking law firms as a quick, convenient and very cost-effective way of bringing about performance improvement and helping partners adopt appropriate behaviour.

360 degree feedback can effectively be used:

- at partner level to deal with individual performance and behaviour issues, making it much easier for managing partners and senior partners to get individual partners to address specific issues
- as part of a broader partner appraisal process, where it proves to be a valuable enhancement to traditional partner appraisals
- with associates to advance their progression and, where appropriate, groom them for partnership
- with non-lawyer professionals who generally welcome the broader-based 360° feedback.

CASE STUDY FIRMS

Here are some examples of ways we have helped firms through the use of 360 degree feedback:

Firm A is a 60 partner firm with several offices in the UK. The partner selection panel was keen to introduce a more objective approach to assessing potential partners and saw 360° feedback as a route to achieving this.

For several years now we have administered a 360° feedback process for the firm. The original process has been streamlined through use of an on-line questionnaire.

Recognising the success of this approach, the firm has recently asked us to provide 360° feedback for all their partners. This is being done on a three-year cycle covering 20 partners each year.

Firm B is a single office firm with 9 partners. A newly appointed management team wanted to introduce 360° feedback as part of the firm's partner appraisal process.

We facilitated discussions with groups of partners to get their input in designing a suitable process. We then administered the process, obtaining feedback through a combination of questionnaires and telephone calls. With a senior member of the firm's board, we jointly facilitated debrief sessions with each partner.

The firm has now completed its third annual cycle of partner appraisals and has extended the process to include its non-lawyer professional managers. They have noticed marked changes in the behaviours of partners as a result of using 360° feedback.

Firm C is a single-office firm with 21 partners. A staff survey (which we administered on their behalf) revealed potential for improvement in the management of people throughout the firm.

We provided a combination of training and coaching for all partners and senior non-lawyer managers. 360° feedback was then obtained 9 months later as a way of assessing whether there had been improvements.

The 360° feedback surveys revealed that in 24 out of 25 cases there had been noticeable improvements in the way people felt they were being managed.

Firm D is a 15 partner firm with several offices. The Managing Partner was keen not only to improve performance across the whole partnership but was also concerned that one or two parts of the firm were lagging in overall performance terms when compared to the rest of the firm.

We interviewed each partner on a face to face basis to obtain feedback on the whole partnership and then provided individual feedback to each partner and from which we developed agreed development plans for all partners.

Additional benefits also accrued from the process. The 360 degree process we had put in place provided a catalyst for changes to be made in one part of the firm which hitherto the firm had found difficulty in implementing. At the same time, as a result of the feedback received the firm reviewed and then strengthened its governance structures.

THE PROCESS

At the simplest level, we obtain feedback through an on-line survey. We have various templates available and we can tailor these to the needs of the firm and the individual.

Using an on-line questionnaire, the 360° feedback process generally includes the following main steps:

- The individual chooses people who are in a position to provide helpful feedback (we will guide the individual on who to choose and we usually recommend including 12 to 15 respondents).
- We send a tailored on-line questionnaire to each of the chosen respondents seeking their confidential feedback. They reply directly to us, so that they are assured of confidentiality.
- We monitor and review all the replies and compile a comprehensive report incorporating the feedback anonymously.

Sometimes it is better to obtain feedback through telephone interviews or even face-to-face. We will advise you on the best approach to meet your needs.

To download a sample 360 degree feedback report [click here](#).

Some firms prefer to allow partners to nominate those from whom they will seek feedback, which we generally recommend, whereas other firms prefer to have us choose for them. There are advantages to each approach and again we would be happy to guide you in decisions such as this.

PITFALLS TO AVOID

Sometimes we encounter firms where a form of 360° feedback is being used but where resulting benefits are considerably less than is potentially achievable. Upon investigation, the reasons for this usually involve one or more of the following:

- **The process is being administered from within the firm.** By having an independent facilitator administer the 360° feedback process, respondents can be assured of anonymity, which is essential in order to obtain full and frank feedback.
- **Individuals are not being allowed to choose their own respondents.** Whilst sometimes it is appropriate not to allow freedom of choice, this can lead to the feedback being given less credence.
- **The feedback report contains comments that are not constructive.** It is important that, through this process, individuals become truly aware of the perceptions of others. However, remarks expressed in a way that is not constructive can lead to unhelpful defensiveness. This is why we review every single response and, where necessary, may edit the wording to ensure that the points are expressed constructively.
- **The feedback is merely a synopsis.** In some firms, partners speak to several others to obtain their feedback before then giving a summary of the feedback to the individual. This is sometimes considered to be a form of 360° feedback but its usefulness falls well short. Individuals need to see the comments made by each respondent, not a brief synopsis which usually will have little impact. Our 360° feedback reports usually run to a dozen pages or more of analysis and comments.
- **Data is over-analysed.** Some on-line systems provide spurious comparisons and distracting detail. We find that a simpler approach, which focuses individuals on key points, is more helpful and leads to performance improvement rather than unhelpful discussions about the data itself.
- **There is not a constructive debrief.** The success of 360° feedback hinges on having a positive and motivational debrief meeting conducted by someone who is suitably skilled at coaching partners to respond positively to the feedback they receive and helping to ensure that an actionable development plan emerges.

WHAT IT COSTS

Whichever option is best suited to your needs, we provide a **per person price** so that you can decide how many individuals you wish to include in the 360° feedback process and the method of seeking and providing feedback.

We offer 360° feedback, using an on-line questionnaire process as described above, from as little as £275 plus VAT per person. Given the improved performance that can be achieved through the process, this represents an excellent return on the investment.

360° FEEDBACK AS A COMPONENT OF PARTNER APPRAISALS

Many of our law firm clients introduce 360° feedback as part of their partner appraisal process. Where this is the case, we find that winning the support of the partners is essential to achieve success. Unless they have had a say in the design of the process, partners are unlikely to be committed to it. Furthermore, partners will have a wealth of knowledge that can help tailor a process ideally suited to the firm.

A starting point is therefore to involve all partners in a constructive discussion to determine what they wish to achieve from partner appraisals and to establish the broad framework from which a suitable process can be designed.

An important contribution partners can make is in helping to clarify what is meant by high performance or appropriate behaviour, recognising that different firms may have different priorities, and that individual partners will contribute in different ways. Fee generation is always likely to be an important factor. However, it is not the only determinant of success and indeed if it were the sole focus of attention the longer-term success of the firm might suffer. Contributions to the management of the firm, teams and projects should also be recognised, as should business development and technical contributions.

Defining what is expected of partners will also help to provide greater transparency for those seeking to become partners in future and can help in grooming potential partners.

QUOTES FROM SOME OF OUR CLIENTS

360 degree feedback provides a highly effective route to changing behaviours and improving performance with relatively little time commitment. The following are comments from partners and other professionals who have benefited from our 360 degree feedback processes:

"I valued the feedback immensely. I found it extremely valuable to view an honest and informative opinion of both me and my work performance from my peers. Also, as it was anonymous, it gave them the opportunity to be open and honest and critical where necessary."

"It helped me better understand the interaction between my direct reports and understand their perception of my management style."

"I believe that implementation of the action plan is already bearing fruit."

"The programme has given me maximum advantage. No amount of "courses" could have given me, in the time we took, the advice that I finished the programme with."

"Valuable and worthwhile in helping an individual address any areas of weakness in which they wish to develop their skills in a neutral, controlled and confidential environment. The 360° feedback provided a great insight into how people see me and how I can improve."

LINKS TO ARTICLES

All-round feedback in a firm can deliver higher performance.

By Peter Scott & Phil Gott

An in-depth look at improving appraisals by including 360° appraisals. Includes contributions from two of our law firm clients.

[Law Society Gazette, September 2009](#)

Masterclass: A virtuous circle.

By Phil Gott & Peter Scott

This article looks at why partner performance moving to the top of the agenda and the various elements that need to be in place to achieve high performance in practice.

[Managing Partner Magazine, January 2010](#)

Facing the fear of feedback

Written by Simon Wilks, Managing Partner of accountancy firm Hays Macintyre. Describes the experience of working with us to introduce a new partner appraisal process including 360° feedback.

[Accountancy Magazine, November 2008](#)

MORE INFORMATION

For more information about how 360 degree feedback could be of benefit to your firm, please contact Peter Scott or Phil Gott.

Peter Scott Consulting

Performance management for law firms



Peter Scott is a leading consultant to law firms and a recognised guru on leadership and management issues.

Peter was for 8 years until 2000 Managing Partner of Eversheds' London and European offices. Since then Peter's consultancy practice has specialised in professional firm management, acting as an advisor, trainer and coach to law firms, both in UK and abroad in relation to their strategic, financial and management issues, with particular focus on helping firms to improve competitiveness through effective performance management.

Peter is Editor of *Practice Management Handbook* published by Law Society Publishing now in its 2nd edition and a member of the Editorial board of *Legal Compliance Bulletin* published by the Law Society.

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Phil Gott is a trainer and coach, specialising in professional service firms. His clients include international and "magic circle" law firms, and several mid-sized firms.

Phil is author of *Managing People in a Law Firm* in The Law Society's Practice Management Handbook, and a white paper on *Managing Talent*. Articles have recently been published in *Professional Marketing*, *The Law Society Gazette* and *Solicitors Journal*.

Phil has been voted *Trainer of the Year* by LETG, a network of 180 law firms.

Phil's focus on people and performance rests on a solid grounding in business formed through business school and his early career as a chartered accountant. Before forming his own consultancy, Phil was UK Head of general practice marketing and Head of Business Training for one of the major accountancy firms.

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