

Guide to 360 Reviews – What is a 360? How Do You Administer 360 Feedback?

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Most of us have heard of 360 reviews, we nod when they are brought up in management meetings — but we don't really understand them and many people fear them.

When I first started helping our customers with 360 reviews for their clients and employees I was astounded at the lack of available guides and comprehensive information about them.

I decided about a year ago to compile my own experience with 360 reviews and the collective experience of our staff and some of our customers here at SurveyGizmo. So, I developed a starter guide for 360s for all of us!

It took a little longer than expected to boil it down to the most important information, but I hope you find this useful as a comprehensive guide that describes what a 360 review is, how to administer it and how not to fear your first 360!

What is a 360 Review?

Most employees are familiar with the reviews their supervisors do every 12 months (if they are lucky — or unlucky depending on their manager). That review involves the employee receiving feedback from a single perspective; that of their manager.

While those reviews are vital, they rarely provide feedback that leads to the professional development of the employee. Typically, a standard job review is focused on the performance issues an employee has with their current job and not much more.

360s are not performance reviews. They are a professional feedback tool designed to help anyone from a CEO to a store clerk develop and hone their professional skills. While a standard review is about the job an employee is doing, a 360 review is about the employee themselves. That makes it very personal and very powerful.

In a 360, you get the combined perspective of a manager and several peers about the team work, communication, leadership and management skills of an employee. The reviewers are asked to comment and rate the employee's professional skills and team impact. The goal is for them to provide feedback to help the employee improve and focus development.

The combined perspective helps to balance the feedback and create a clear picture for the employee about their behavior, impact and skills.

That improved perspective is valuable enough alone, but a really good 360 review also combines that feedback with the personal and professional goals of the employee to create a road map for education and self-development—if they are done right.

Why 360s Are Useful (When Done Right)

All skills can be learned, but not all skills are easy to learn.

This is really true when it comes to some of the most important skills in our lives like leadership, communication, vision, and team work. These skills may not sound sexy to us in our technology-skill centric culture but business skills, not technical skills are what separate the folks at the very top of their career potential from everyone else.

Do you want to see something really amazing? Watch how much someone can achieve when they are strong in both technical and business skills together.

It takes about 10,000 hours to become an expert on anything — but that 10k really depends on having quality and frequent feedback.

Which is why, contrary to popular belief, it's easier to become an expert in technical skills (like programming) than to become an expert in business skills (like team work).

Technical skills are easier because they have a built-in feedback mechanism: one way or another they either work or they don't. The feedback is immediate and inarguable.

Business skills lack a built-in feedback mechanism; they require feedback from other people.

I don't know about where you work, but in most offices people are not prone to offer you feedback in a constructive and frequent way. Most of us are lucky if our manager provides us feedback every few months, and our peers usually don't feel like it's their job.

That's where 360 reviews are helpful.

360 reviews help people develop business and interpersonal skills. In particular, they focus on three key pieces of feedback:

1. Identifying a starting point for development of new skills.
2. Measuring progress as the subject works on skills over time.
3. Identifying the personal blind spots of behavior and the impact that everyone has but never notices.

Of course, there has been some hype about 360 feedback. It's not a silver bullet or the sole key to leadership, management and interpersonal development.

360 reviews have some limitations that people seem to forget, and these limitations are really important for employers and managers to understand.

- A 360 review will not change a person.
- The review won't do the hard work and practice that comes between reviews. The employee will do that (hopefully with your support).
- A 360 review should not take the place of normal performance reviews or regular feedback. If a manager has specific performance issues with an employee, they should discuss those issues with the employee directly and candidly (and immediately).
- Without support (and participation) from the top of the organization, 360s will be harder to integrate into a company's culture.
- A 360 review is primarily for the benefit of the subject, not the team or organization.

I think the last item on that list is the hardest for an organization to understand. Only the subject (usually an employee) of a 360 can take the feedback and do something constructive with it.

The benefit to an organization is the development of stronger and more capable staff — but that only happens if the subject of the review buys into the concept and process.

This guide will teach you the roles and process of 360, but each organization and staff member needs to understand the value of 360s individually before the process will really work.

Responsibilities by Role

In any 360 review there are 3-4 roles and it's important for everyone to know what their role is and what responsibilities they have towards the success of the review.

The roles are Administrator, Subject, Manager and Reviewer (sometimes called "Rater").

The Administrator

The administrator is the person who will conduct the review by: preparing it, conducting interviews, presenting the results, and helping the subject of the review design a plan for improvement and development.

It's the second most important job in a 360; the subject themselves having the first.

The manager of the subject should not be the administrator. Consider a third party that is not involved in current issues and does not have a personal agenda that may be a conflict of interest.

Someone in the Human Resources group in a company usually fills this role or it can be an external consultant that specializes in 360 reviews and professional development.

The main responsibilities that the administrator has are:

1. Explain the purpose and benefits behind the review to everyone.
2. Describe the process to the reviewers, manager and subject so it's clear.
3. Administrate the feedback collection (by survey or interview).
4. Coach the subject's manager to help them understand the results and action plan after the review.
5. Present and discuss the results with the subject.
6. Develop a plan and help provide resources for the subject of the review after discussing the results.

If you are the administrator, the top thing to remember is that you are serving the subject of the review, not the manager or the organization. For the purposes of this review, you are in service to the subject.

As an administrator, remember this is not a performance review; it's a tool to help a person develop valuable skills. The entire point of a 360 review is not to judge the subject; it's about providing feedback and a development framework for important business and interpersonal skills.

The Subject

The subject of the review is the person that is being reviewed by their peers and their manager(s) if they have any.

It's important for the subject of the review to understand the people that are reviewing them are being asked to provide constructive insights. The reviewer's observations will help the subject understand the difference between how they see themselves and how their co-workers actually see them. It's frequently uncomfortable, but very valuable.

Here are some key points for the subject to know:

- The people reviewing you are not being asked to judge you, just to provide feedback candidly and constructively.
- The feedback that is given is not right or wrong. It's just feedback.
- You don't have to change anything about yourself or your behavior after a review if you decide not to. Of course, if you don't make any changes you won't learn new skills or see different outcomes at work, but it's your choice.
- You may be asked to review yourself as well. This is only meant to identify blind spots you may have.
- The review will identify places where you can change your behavior or develop new skills to help you succeed at your goals.
- Be prepared to be surprised by one or two things, you may even be angry. That's a normal reaction. Pay close attention to it — it will identify areas where you have the greatest opportunity to be more effective!

The most important thing for a subject to understand is that they are 100% responsible for listening to the feedback, deciding on change, and developing new skills.

The Reviewers

Reviewers are the 4-10 people (other than the manager) who will be answering questions provided by the administrator about the subject. They will have some form of working relationship with the subject, be it a co-worker, team member or even a contact at an important supplier.

Their job is to provide valuable feedback for the subject and also rate the subject on key skills. The ratings provide a measurement of improvement for the subject, but also a baseline to understand areas where the subject may want to focus attention and development.

Here are some things all reviewers should know:

- Your job is to provide constructive feedback for the subject.
- Answer honestly, candidly, and constructively.
- Your answers will be anonymous. No one (other than the administrator in the case of an interview-style review) will know specifically what you said.
- If the feedback you are providing is in the form of a survey, give some thought to the open-text questions. Scale questions are faster, but the open-text will have more meaning.

The Manager

Most subjects in a 360 review will have a manager taking part in the process as well. This person's feedback is usually tracked and delivered separately from the individual reviewers because the perspective is completely different.

The manager of a 360 subject has a similar job to a reviewer; they'll be asked to answer questions about the subject's skills, behavior and interpersonal relationships.

The hard part for a manager will be remembering that the goal of a 360 review is not to measure job effectiveness of the employee. The manager and the employee should already know how well they are performing. If there is doubt, it will cause fear and defensiveness which may impede the success of the review.

A 360 review is not a replacement for continuous candid feedback from a manager and it shouldn't be the only time you feel comfortable sharing difficult feedback you don't want to give in person.

A 360 review is a great way for a good employee to get even better and for a struggling employee to learn where to improve.

After the review, the manager and the administrator will meet to discuss a development plan for the subject to work on and improve on skills and relationships. Be sure the manager is willing to provide support to the employee after the review by providing resources, encouragement, coaching, acknowledgement of progress and time.

Who Should Not be Given a 360

While a 360 review can always provide insights and value for an employee it's best used when the subject is ready for this type of feedback (and feedback in general).

Even the best administrated 360 review can seem like a personal attack when a subject is not ready for it. If that happens, you'll end up upsetting the employee, negatively impacting their performance and no learning will take place.

It's important for the administrator and manager to successfully get buy-in from the subject before they start a 360 review. Selling them on the idea is very important.

Here's a few questions you can ask yourself about the subject to decide if a 360 review is appropriate:

1. Does the subject have time or energy to dedicate towards development of business and interpersonal skills?
2. Does the subject have a healthy relationship with feedback? Do they react constructively?
3. Has the subject received regular feedback from their manager? IMPORTANT: 360s are not a substitute for good leadership and management.
4. Has the subject been employed at his or her job long enough to receive meaningful feedback from peers? (At least 12 months)

Item number three is vitally important to remember. I do not recommend a 360 if a subject is not getting effective and regular feedback from their manager. It's unlikely to be a positive experience for anyone. The manager should seek to improve their candid feedback skills first, and then provide these tools to the subject once trust has been established.

Note: One way to avoid this issue is to ask leadership and management to undergo 360 reviews first. Begin top down in an organization. Nothing builds a positive culture of feedback in an organization like a clear example from the top.

What Questions to Ask in a 360

What questions you'll ask in a 360 depends very much on your organization and which model of 360 you'd like to use. I've seen many review styles and they have had their unique strengths and weaknesses.

Actually, these reviews are a whole industry in and of themselves. Often, question sets are proprietary and developed by consultants. Each consultant will swear up and down that their method is the best or the only one you should consider using.

However, there is nothing stopping you from developing your own 360 survey.

If you'd like to develop your own questions and methodology then here are some skills that are appropriate for a 360 review.

- Leadership Skills (Delegation, Ownership/Responsibility, Vision, Listening, Approachability, Coaching, Decision Making, Change Management, Delegation, Risk-Taking, and Service)
- Communication Skills (Listening, Clarity, Speaking, Networking, Non-Verbal Behaviors, Openness, Negotiation, Energy, Giving Feedback, and Receiving Feedback)
- Team Skills (Listening, Questioning, Helping, Participation, Peer Feedback, and Reliability)
- Organization Skills (Project, Financial, Personal Time, Logistics, and Attention to Detail)
- Creativity Skills (Problem Solving, Problem Identification, Inventiveness, Brainstorming, and Making connections)
- Interpersonal Skills (Empathy, Confidence, Stress management, Positivity, Negotiation, Group Work, Approachability, Enthusiasm, and Personal Appearance)
- Organizational Alignment (Alignment & Understanding of: Community, Values, Mission, Vision, Strategic Plan, and Processes)

I don't suggest asking questions on all of these items at once. Pick which skill sets and factors are most important to your organization at the moment. Then develop questions in a survey that help you understand and answer these factors.

Be aware that before you start measuring a particular skill, you should have a good idea of what success looks like and what resources you are prepared to offer for development and improvement to the subject.

As the administrator, you should be prepared to assist the subject and their manager to improve any skill you decide to measure.

Here are some other key points to remember:

- Avoid technical skill questions, there are better ways to measure and provide feedback on those.
- When phrasing questions, try to focus the attention of the reviewer on the impact of the subject's habits and skills, not on the person themselves.
- Be sure to ask open ended questions that ask your reviewers what the subject should stop doing, what they should start doing differently or should continue doing for each main area.
- Keep your survey short. It's perfectly fine if you decide to only focus on a small selection of skills at a time. Just be consistent organizationally.
- Keep a balance between scale questions and open ended questions
- Use a single scale for all scale questions. A scale of 1 through 5 is common and easy for participants to understand.

Once you've developed the objectives for your 360 and identified your subjects you are ready to initiate the 360 process itself.

The 360 Process

Here's how it goes:

Step 1 – Meet With the Subject

In step one, you want to make sure the subject understands the 360 process, and how the feedback they receive can be used.

I think it's also important to get an idea of the subject's own goals and vision for the future. It will help frame the conversation after the review in a personal and constructive manner.

Finally, make sure the subject of the review knows that you will be there to help guide and coach them after the review. If they have any problems or roadblocks, they should feel free to come and see you.

Step 2 – Talk with the Subject's Manager

After you have a basic idea of the subject's expectations, it's time to validate them with the manager.

The manager will have their own goals and objectives for the subject. Discuss these goals and the manager's expectations for the review and make sure they are aligned with a 360 initiative. If they are not, a different form of structured feedback may work better.

I'd also set the expectation that the review process won't change the employee; it only provides a measurement and direction for change. The motivation has to come from the subject themselves and be supported by their work environment and manager.

Get a commitment from the manager to provide actionable feedback and support the development of the employee after the review.

Finally, Ask the manager for a list of co-workers and team members that work with the subject to help you select reviewers.

Tip: Ask how long they worked together. Shoot for people that have worked with each other for 1-3 years. They'll have the most meaningful feedback.

Step 3 – Send Out the Review

If you are doing the review by personal interview, you'll need to schedule time with everyone. But a more common approach is to conduct the rating and review through an online survey or feedback tool.

If you are sending out a survey through email, be sure to introduce yourself to the reviewers and explain the process.

Ask them to provide feedback on the subject, but set some guidelines as well. They should be encouraged to provide constructive feedback and examples.

Step 4 – Review Data and Prepare A Report

This is where your own talents as a coach and 360 administrator will come in. You should review all of the comments and scores for each subject and prepare a report that synthesizes the most important feedback for the subject.

Manager reviews and employee self-reviews will naturally stand apart, but when reviewing the feedback you might notice that a particular response seems like an outlier or is particularly insightful. If you have access to the reviewer, you might want to ask the reviewer for an interview and drill in more carefully.

Remember, you're looking for key opportunities for the subject to develop and improve their skills and relationships. Focus on areas where the subject should try to improve in your report.

Tip: I really recommend paraphrasing all comments rather than showing them directly. Let the subject know you paraphrased everything so they will spend less time trying to figure out who said what.

Delivering the Results

While the survey can be somewhat automated the delivery of results should not be.

Delivering the results should be done in person or over the phone. A guided reveal of the feedback and careful discussion about what it means is vital to understanding it for most subjects.

Tip: Avoid sending the report to the subject before the meeting. If you are teleconferencing, send the report while the employee is on the phone with you so you can coach them through the results.

Be cognizant that something in the report may spark an emotional reaction for the subject. This may indicate feedback they disagree with or comes from their own blind spot.

I recommend that before the review you are honest. Let them know that **something** (you don't know what) in the review is more than likely to invoke a strong emotional reaction. That's a gift. Ask them to pay close attention to those areas of the review. They may represent long-term miscommunications or a blind spot the subject has about themselves.

Celebrate what the subject does well — but this isn't a balancing act. Don't sandwich the "bad" with the good. There is no "bad feedback" only useful feedback and the point of a 360 review is to focus on actionable feedback.

The goal of your meeting should be to help the subject digest all the information that's coming their way and identify actionable areas for change, improvement and development.

At the end of the review, you should have a plan with the subject to improve or change key behaviors and develop new skills — that's the entire point of the exercise, so don't forget about it!

Finally, document the conversation, the plan, and any resources the subject will need going forward.

After the 360

After the 360 review, as the administrator, you should meet with the manager and make sure they understand the plan you and the employee developed. Make sure you have buy-in from the manager and they have all the resources necessary to help the employee.

For the subject, after the review is when all the work really starts. First, accepting the feedback for what it is and seeking to understand it better. Then deciding what to change and what skills to work on.

Everyone (managers, administrators, reviewers and the subject of the review themselves) should remember that personal and skill development doesn't happen in the 360 review, it happens afterwards — and it takes time and effort.

Final Note: 360s are a Skill Too

The ability to administrate great 360 reviews is a skill. It takes time to do them well, and plenty of feedback — just like everything else.

If you are conducting your first 360 as an administrator, expect to get it wrong. Don't expect to be an expert at it instantly.

You might consider hiring someone with experience in administrating these reviews before diving into the deep end yourself. Learn by observing others and going through the process a few times yourself.

I also recommend that you regularly ask for feedback about the process and your role in it. The managers, reviewers and subjects are great sources of feedback for you too!

Good Luck!!