

Questionnaires for 360 feedback

Designing good questionnaires and competency frameworks for 360 degree feedback is central to the usefulness of the exercise. Here's how to do it effectively and avoid the pitfalls.

Competencies are groupings of the skills and behaviours that you expect people to display in the workplace. In most cases you will want to focus on around six to twelve of these areas which you believe are important to your organisation's culture and effectiveness.

The competencies and behaviours that make for good management and leadership have been extensively studied and documented. Good competency frameworks are readily available and in many cases have been extensively tested. Often choosing a pre-designed framework is a good option for running a 360 feedback exercise.

However, there may be good reasons you might want to develop your own competency frameworks and questionnaires. For example:

- You are teaching a particular specialised subject or mode of working and you want to focus on the particular skills and behaviours that requires.
- Your organisation has a particular house style and you want to reflect the language and terminology you commonly use into the 360 tool.
- Your organisation has a well established competency or value framework and you want to align the 360 tool around that.

Even if you do decide to build your own framework you may find it helpful to start by looking at a pre-designed one as a starting point.

360 degree feedback works best when used to assess soft skills and emotional intelligence based behaviours rather than specific technical skills or achievement of objectives.

Defining your competencies.

The competencies you choose should cover the whole range of skills and behaviours that you expect people to exhibit. And you should start by making sure that you have a proper set of names and definitions for your competencies. Your competencies should be clearly defined to align around natural groupings of the skills and behaviours that you wish to assess.

For example:

- Leadership, Communication, Time Management, Analytical Thinking are good examples of competencies because it is clear what they refer to and they represent natural groupings of skills and behaviours.
- "Self motivation and Assertiveness" would not be a good definition because self motivation and assertiveness are very different things and it would not make sense to bundle them together.

You may choose to create a framework of competencies which contain mandatory – or core – competencies that you expect everyone to have, and optional ones which you only expect people in certain job roles to need. For example: a marketer might require additional competencies that a design engineer doesn't – and vice versa.

Building your questions.

Your competencies need to be supported by a selection of carefully chosen observable behaviours which can then be assessed and used to build up a picture of overall competence. Choosing these behaviours and designing the questions around them is crucial to the success of your 360 feedback tool:

1. Always use positive indicators: your questions should always be designed so

that more is better. For example “Is punctual and a good timekeeper” is a positive indicator – the more punctual the better. However, “Is often late for appointments” is a negative indicator and should be avoided. Reason: firstly respondents may become confused with the marking, one may think “He’s always late = frequent behaviour” therefore mark 5/5 where another person thinks “Always late is a bad thing” and mark 1/5. Also, it is impossible to meaningfully calculate overall scores in the feedback reports when there is a mixture of positive and negative indicators.

2. Make sure your questions mean what you intend them to mean: it’s all too easy for a small group of people heavily involved in designing questions to end up using their own terminology and because they all know what they are trying to say they don’t realise that it’s confusing to other people. Test out your questions on a sample of people who have never seen them before and see if they understand what you intended them to understand.
3. Target observable behaviours: you can’t ask questions about someone’s internal thought processes because other people have no way of knowing. Make sure that you ask about behaviours that are easy for other people to observe.
4. Ask one question at a time: make sure that your question only targets one behaviour at a time. For example “Arrives punctually for appointments and makes a valuable contribution” is two separate questions. He may be punctual but have no contribution to make, or he may be late but have a huge contribution to make. Respondents would find this question hard to answer.
5. Ask questions that the respondents will be able to answer: will the people who are answering the questionnaire have had the opportunity to have observed the behaviour you are asking about?
6. Use approximately the same number of questions in each competency: when the feedback report is generated overall scores for each competency are generated. Using the same number of questions in each competency will ensure that each will have the same weighting in the final report. If a competency has too few questions then it means that those questions will be over-represented in the report.
7. Ask a selection of questions that target the whole competency: good 360 questionnaires aim to gather a well rounded view of a person’s behaviour. For example: leadership covers a range of aspects, make sure you cover the full range and don’t focus on a narrow area.
8. Don’t ask the same question several ways around: it’s all too easy to draft a number of questions not realising that they are basically the same question differently phrased. Start with the definition of your competency and then break it down into its parts and then draft questions about each of the parts. Don’t start from the bottom up.
9. Make sure each question stands on its own: don’t draft questions that rely on neighbouring questions for context or to give them additional meaning. Imagine that you are asking the question in isolation – would it still make sense to someone who has never seen it before?
10. Are your questions correctly classified? Some competencies have definitions which are very close or overlapping. For example: Communication and Influencing may have a certain amount of overlap – make sure that each question is placed

- under the most appropriate competency.
11. Ask questions that will get a spread of results: a question where everyone scores 5/5 is of little use to anyone. Make sure the questions are sufficiently challenging that you can expect to see a range of responses to reflect differing ability levels.
 12. Pitch your questions at the appropriate level: You would expect a senior manager or director to have communication skills of a different type and level to a junior employee. Make sure your questions are aimed appropriately.

Free text questions

Free text questions are where the respondents have the opportunity to offer additional comments or advice to the candidate in addition to the structured questioning.

Answers to the free text questions cannot be “processed” in the way that the numerical questions are. They are open ended and have a different purpose to the highly structured format of the numerical questions. Although answers to these questions can be valuable, unless they are properly designed respondents will not give answers which are useful and meaningful – or they may simply leave them blank.

Good free text questions are specific, real life and open ended. Bad questions are conceptual, vague and leave no room for the respondent to give useful creative responses. Aligning your free text questions specifically to your competency headings creates bad questions – competencies are too conceptual, people find them difficult to answer and they do not lend themselves to open ended responses.

Examples of good free text questions:

- “What does X do well that you would like

- them to do more of?”
- “What would you like X to do differently or stop doing?”
- “What could X do that would improve our working relationship?”

Examples of bad free text questions:

- “How would you assess X’s collaborative skills?”
- “What comments have you on X’s abilities as a leader?”
- “Comment on X’s time management ability?”

Testing your questionnaire

Don’t miss out this important step. It could save you the inconvenience and embarrassment of sending out scores or hundreds of questionnaires containing questions that people don’t understand, can’t answer or deliver unhelpful results.

- Select a number of people who have not been involved in the design process and have never seen the questions before.
- Jumble the questions up to make sure they are not relying on neighbouring questions for context.
- Ask people:
 - a) what they understand the questions to mean
 - b) do they find the questions easy to answer

Finally you should run a small pilot of your 360 tool to exercise the whole process and see if it performs in the way you want and gives the results you expect.