



How to Facilitate 360 Feedback When Not Face-to-Face

part of our series of Tools

The Talent Cloud Platform

Developing Skills. Encouraging Performance. Boosting Recognition.



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Sharing feedback and planning for action following a 360 review is a crucial part of the development process. However, with pressures on time, advancements in technology and now more hybrid and home office working, some organisations carry out this feedback conversation remotely.

But what happens when the feedback facilitator and recipient are no longer in the same room and face-to-face? What are the implications for the feedback conversation?

Online video services such as Skype®, Zoom® and Microsoft Teams® mean that participants can see each other and appear face-to-face, but connectivity, use of a webcam, delay or hard-to-read facial and eye movements means that there are additional areas to consider.

We've brought together 10 essential areas which need your consideration and action if you are looking to facilitate an effective feedback conversation by telephone.

1. You have to work harder to build rapport.

It is harder to build rapport over a phone as you are not able to see the visual cues or deploy the non-verbal tactics you would normally access (eye contact, nodding, mirroring body language, open gestures with hands, etc.). Smiles can be detected in a voice, but they can also be easily missed.

Furthermore, when meeting in person, you typically have 'the walk', and the associated small talk. That is, between where you meet and the room in which you are going to do the feedback session, you are able to walk and talk, using this to help set the scene, re-establish or begin building rapport and to check on current understanding. This small talk plays an important role, putting the recipient at ease.

To help establish rapport when not face-to-face, your questioning and listening skills will become even more important. You can ask more open questions about thoughts, reactions, feelings, what's happening for them at the moment in their role, challenges faced within the organisation. You also need to be vigilant for signs of apprehension, distraction, or defensiveness on the recipient's part.

It's equally important to engage in thorough contracting and to establish expectations when not meeting in person as it is when giving feedback face-to-face. However, your contracting and expectation-setting in the former scenario also needs to cover some of the differences that we outline in the following points.

2. You need to check how long they have and that there will be no interruptions.

You may well have made sure that you are in a place free from interruption and distraction, but if the two of you are not physically in the same place, you need to check that the same is true for the recipient.

It is worth reminding them when setting up the coaching conversation to book a private room with a phone – preferably a landline – away from the open-plan environment in which many people work, but it's a good idea to confirm this at the start of the call. Often people will assume they can just find a quiet space when the time comes, but it can be very frustrating for both parties when they get ousted from an apparently empty meeting room or are constantly distracted by interruptions.

Think about your own environment too; it may well be a convenient time for you to call from a train or coffee shop, but if the recipient can hear you are in a public place they are likely to feel less comfortable discussing things openly and are likely to find the background noise irritating. They deserve your full attention.

Also, check how long they have to speak with you. You won't be able to see any of the 'getting ready to leave' behaviours such as looking at a watch, closing a notebook or piling up papers.

3. You need to think about connectivity and network coverage.

Many people will use their mobiles, but it is important to note that sound quality and reception varies greatly, especially if it's one mobile to another. If possible, arrange to use landlines, but if you're using a mobile test the signal strength first from the room you're using.

If you're thinking of having the feedback conversation using a software application such as Skype® – regardless of whether or not you use the webcam – you need again to check on the connectivity and be aware that often there is a slight delay in sound so people may be 'interrupting' when they do not intend to. Even with a webcam, the conversation will not be as natural as it would be in person and don't mistake people looking away from the camera for anything more than they are looking at the screen and are not used to 'meeting' in this way!

If you are on the phone, it is worth using a headset to free up your hands. It can become uncomfortable having a phone pressed to your ear for two hours and this also limits your movement and ability to communicate and use gestures in a 'normal' manner. The conversation is likely to feel more natural, energetic and expressive if you can use your hands and move more freely.

4. You need to be clearer in setting the agenda and clarifying expectations.

As you can't direct the person's attention to anything physically (by pointing), you have to really control the conversation and clearly describe what you want them to do. If possible, share the agenda or the outline of the session in advance and ask if the other party wants to add or change anything.

Make sure you send any supporting documents (and the report, if the person is to have sight of it before your discussion) in advance and provide them with clear instructions and access information to any conference calling, screen sharing or online facilities. When you are preparing for the call, ensure you factor in sufficient time for getting yourself and your screen set up and time to dial in so you are not late in calling the feedback recipient.

5. You cannot rely on printouts and being able to share notes and paper.

Often, valuable feedback and coaching discussions are held over visual aids to help to make sense of it – when on the phone you can't have a piece of paper between you. You can, however, send any models out in advance or you may have access to other online software or apps that allow you to share notes, drawings, visual aids etc.

You won't be able to see if they are making notes for themselves, so it's worth contracting around this in advance; you want to ensure that they take away some clear action points following the feedback session so make sure this is clear to them at the outset, and that they will need something to make notes on during your discussion. Ask them to summarise regularly, at key points.

If you are both referring to a copy of the report, you will need to give clear verbal instructions of what to look at and what you want them to do. Using the page numbers and making use of cues such as colour and graphics can help you to direct the person's attention to the appropriate place in the report and minimise paper-rustling.

6. It is more difficult to remember what has been said.

Studies have shown that memory for what's been said is better when the event is multi-modal (e.g., when the individual can hear and see what's being discussed).

As such, it tends to be harder to remember phone conversations than face-to-face ones because memories formed under the latter conditions are richer in contextual information and as such are easier to recall. As we've said above, effective note taking is going to be even more important and it is a very good idea to get the recipient to take notes and to check that this is happening. Encourage them to

record action points and development suggestions and ask them to send you a summary of this by email after the meeting.

7. It is harder to maintain concentration.

A good feedback session – using a typical amount of data from a 360degree review tool – can last one to two hours. On the phone it is going to be much harder to maintain concentration, interest and enthusiasm – or to avoid getting distracted or bored – over the duration of the feedback session. This would apply to both you and the recipient and it is worth considering taking breaks (remember the maximum average concentration span is about 20 minutes) to avoid feedback fatigue.

It is probably worth ‘chunking’ the session and dividing it into sections (e.g., a competency at a time – but you’ll probably find yourself jumping around in the data as you start to make links). At the end of each section, it is a good idea to have a summary and covering of key points to ensure things are noted and taken on board.

8. You have to summarise more frequently and more effectively

In the absence of nods, eye contact and visual cues, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not they are engaged in the discussion, agreeing with things, switched off etc.

You will probably have to ask more questions (e.g., “Can you summarise what we’ve covered so far?” So how have you decided to respond to that?”; “How well is this working for you?”) and use active listening skills to check how they’re doing and where they are.

9. You need to check understanding

You’ll also need to be more rigorous in checking understanding– again because you won’t have visual cues to determine whether they are having difficulty processing the information or keeping up with the pace of the conversation.

Again, this is largely about your active listening skills and about asking good questions. Play back things that they have said to check your understanding and to show that you are still engaged and interested in the conversation. Reflect their feelings about the feedback and try to pick up on things that are poorly expressed or under the surface; are there things they are not saying? Attend carefully to specific words and choice of language. Watch out for repeated phrases and references which could signify something of importance or value to the other person.

10. Silences can be difficult to judge... but are so important

A silence on the phone can be difficult to judge – it could be that the person is reflecting, but it could also mean that they are upset, annoyed, disengaged, or doing something else!

Having said this, silences are very important, especially if the person has an ‘I’ preference (that is, in MBTI® terms, Introversion where people prefer to focus on the inner world of ideas and impressions). This is more likely to happen as the person processes the information and some people are less likely to externalise their thinking and their reactions compared to others.

So, it is worth setting some ground rules and expectations up around this at the outset: say that it is OK to leave pauses and silences as they are thinking things through, coming up with ideas, comparing it with other information or deciding on actions to take as a result of feedback– and that you’re used to that.

You could also suggest that, in order to make the discussion flow more easily, they could signpost this when they are doing this – and you should do the same (e.g., “OK, I’m going to give that some thought – give me a moment while I consider it”; “What’s happening now is I’m looking back at my notes – you



said something interesting earlier and I'd like to go back to it"; "I'm just looking for a question/comment that I think could be related to this – I'll let you know when I find it").

Silences are really important, and you both need to be comfortable when they happen; allow them to happen but help the other person to understand why they are happening and that it is a useful and 'active' silence rather than a distracted, absent or passive one!

Next steps

If you would like to take a closer look at how your organisation can benefit from 360-degree feedback, please get in touch.

About Head Light

Head Light is an award-winning talent management software and consulting firm that works with clients to define and implement impactful talent management strategies.

Talent Cloud® is our cloud-based portfolio of integrated talent management software tools designed for those who expect the maximum return from talent management processes. Our training and consulting services uniquely complement our breakthrough software that engages employees, managers and senior leaders in the selection, development and progression of people in their businesses.

Companies in the FTSE 350, public sector, large and small, from retailers to high tech innovators have all benefitted from our tools, techniques and expertise. Founded in 2004, we are headquartered in the UK.



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How do I...

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How do I...

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How do I...

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How do I...

embed new values and improve culture

How do I...

develop Skills of the Future