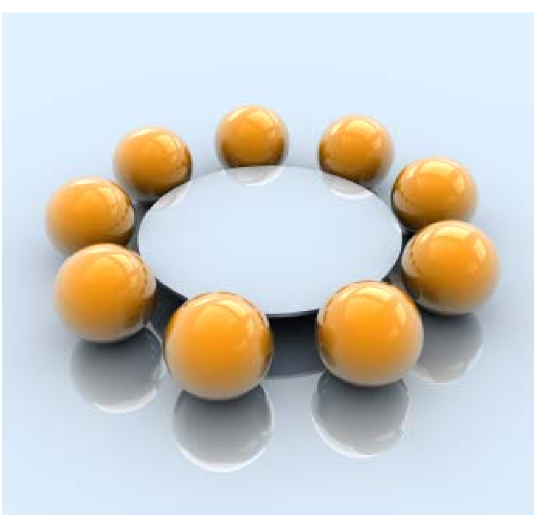
360 reviews: Best practices for use in an MBA course

A white paper for business school deans and faculty

This white paper describes 14 best practices for administering and managing 360 reviews in an academic setting.

These are derived from classroom experience using 360 reviews at Babson College for over five years.

It is hoped that sharing these best practices will encourage the adoption of 360 reviews as a learning tool in more business schools and colleges... and help make that process easier and more effective.



Definition of a 360 review

A 360 degree review is a way to gather and analyze feedback from many different perspectives: direct reports, peers, managers and even customers, suppliers or other stakeholders. The results are often used for professional development planning.

Why 360s in MBA courses?

If the 360 review is carefully integrated into the course curriculum, and well-designed to support the same pedagogical goals, it can become an unforgettable part of the learning experience.

A 360 review is an experiential activity that can engage MBA students in robust professional development activities, often for the first time in their lives.

Since a 360 review involves looking at a range of feedback from different perspectives, this provides an excellent way to teach students about talent management from "both sides of the table" including:

- their responsibilities to their direct reports as managers, and
- their own professional development as employees.

For a working or executive MBA student, this links directly to their current job prospects.

For example, a 360 review can be used to help students assess their own talents, skills, values and motives as they create a personal career development plan.

Through this exercise, students can get hands-on practice in assessment, selection, coaching and development planning.

These are all very necessary skills that MBA students will need to become successful managers and executives.

How Babson College uses 360s

As one of the top-rated business schools in the U.S., Babson College has a tradition of innovation.

For more than five years, the college has used 360 degree reviews to engage business students in robust professional development.

Since 2006, Babson College has used 360 reviews in all three levels of management program offerings: undergrad, MBA and executive education.

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An estimated 2,500 students and 12 faculty members have been involved.

These 360 reviews have enjoyed a consistently high response rate of 80 to 82 percent.

The college began using 360 reviews in its executive education courses by outsourcing through an external vendor.

In 2006, Babson brought the process in-house with the eXplorance Blue/360 system for both its MBA and undergraduate programs.

Three types of best practices

Some of these best practices revolve around how to **teach** using 360 reviews, others around how to **administer** 360 reviews in an academic setting, and still others around how to **manage the technology** that supports the process.

Where possible, these are arranged in chronological order; example, designing the questionnaire is described before returning the results to students.

Best practice #1: Design 360 reviews around curricular core competencies

In an academic setting, 360 reviews should be designed around the core competencies that underlie the curriculum.

For instance, for the Managerial Assess-ment and Development course at Babson, the 360 questionnaires are based on these MBA core curriculum competencies:

- **Leadership, coaching, teamwork and change management**
- **Business acumen**
- **Decision-making and problem-solving**
- **Communications**
- **Creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship**
- **Ethics and the law**.

Involve faculty members—especially those with any experience with 360s in business—to create the questionnaire.

Expect the process of designing the 360 questionnaire to take several months and go through several iterations.

This is a wise investment, since it pools more ideas, gains the buy-in of more faculty, and ensures a more robust questionnaire that may serve for several years without needing significant revisions.

Best practice #2: Consider how to preserve confidentiality for raters

Raters tend to provide the most constructive and objective feedback when they're assured that 360 subjects can't tell "who said what."

But in certain cases, giving that assurance can be a challenge.

Consider a working MBA student with only one direct report; they will have only one rater in their "direct report" group. And that rater's anonymity would be lost in any report organized by groups.

There are two likely ways to protect the anonymity of very small groups:

- by merging several groups together, or
- by suppressing any feedback gathered from small groups.

In the first approach, you can merge the student's "direct report" group of one person with their "peer group" of four people to create a "peer/direct reports" group of five. This number is large enough to protect anonymity.

In the second approach, tell every student that if they have three or fewer raters in any group, all feedback from that group will be dropped from their 360 reports.

This will motivate students to make sure they have enough raters in every group.

As always, it is better to make allowances for these cases **before** they happen, not after.

Best practice #3: Set expectations properly for students

Over the years, Babson has learned the importance of communicating a clear agenda for the 360s to both students and raters. Both need to know the scope of the 360 review, how the feedback is gathered, and how the results will be used.

For students, prepare a multi-step orientation that carries on throughout the course. Here are five possible channels for providing this orientation.

1. Videoconference: In classes with remote students, host a videoconference to introduce the concept of 360 reviews and how they relate to the class material.

2. Course materials: Provide students with background reading on 360 reviews, including their history, how they are gathered, popular uses, and any thought-provoking critiques.

3. E-mail: Send each student a detailed e-mail that explains how to pick their raters and how the process works. For instance, ask students to tell raters to expect e-mails from them from a college address, and to adjust their spam filters accordingly.

4. Classroom sessions: After the 360 reviews are underway, hold face-to-face classes to discuss how to interpret the data the students will soon be receiving.

This will help students understand that a 360 report yields data about the perceptions of other people which they need to connect to other feedback they've received or their past experiences.

5. Personal reflection: Give each student opportunities for reflection on the 360 process and findings. A personal blog or journal are two possible vehicles. Have faculty provide feedback on reflections.

Best practice #4: Set expectations properly for raters

For raters, the main issue is whether they will be personally identifiable in any reports delivered to the student.

To address this concern, draft an e-mail for raters that explains precisely how the gathered information will be used. Keep this e-mail short and simple to ensure a high readership.

The fact that Babson students consistently enjoy an 80 percent response rate, or better, proves that this communication effort pays off.

Best practice #5: Foster teamwork between faculty and administrators

Since faculty have the closest interactions with students, put them on the front line to support students throughout the 360.

Ensure that faculty receive all the same e-mails at the same time as students and raters, so they can follow the 360 progress. Train them to check response rates for any student(s) in real time.

Give faculty e-mail addresses to students and raters for any non-technical questions. Pass any technical questions on to the survey administrator. Do not allow finger-pointing, only problem-solving.

Developing this spirit of teamwork ensures that both faculty and administrators remain committed to a successful 360 process.

Best practice #6: Give students complete ownership of reviews

Develop a code of conduct for faculty and staff which affirms that students own the results of their surveys. Then set up appropriate policies and procedures to implement this understanding.

For example, have faculty print a single copy of all 360 reports and deliver them by hand to each student in class. Create a faculty norm that no professor reads any report unless a student specifically asks them to.

Only e-mail an electronic copy of a report to a student on their request. And do not send it to the student's regular work e-mail.

(Many companies have a policy that any e-mail sent through the corporate system becomes company property and may be read by managers or IT staff.)

Retain digital copies for one year in case any student asks for another copy of their report after the course concludes.

After one year, delete all personally identifiable information for all students.

Best practice #7: Create a supportive process for returning 360 results to students

Students often need guidance to put 360 results into perspective.

For example, how much attention should they pay to fractional numbers?

At Babson, faculty have a rule that any score variation of less than half a point can be ignored. In other words, a rating of 3.6 is not significantly different from a rating of 4.0.

Instead, they direct students to look for larger patterns in the data.
Some of the richest sources of information for students can be open-ended questions like these:

- **What are the subject's one or two greatest strengths?**
- **What are one or two things they could do to be more effective?**
- **Please comment on anything you think would be helpful for the subject.**

Give a final assignment where students work with a peer to interpret their results and create a professional development plan for themselves.

During this assignment, challenge students to think about their short- and long-term career goals, the competencies they'll need to achieve these goals, how they plan to work around any barriers, and where they can get support and feedback.

Faculty should respond to reflections to help build a student's self-awareness.

As the students create their development plans, ask them to post the feedback they gave their partner. This way, faculty can help the students develop coaching skills at the same time.

All these interactions help create a supportive environment for understanding the 360 results.

Best practice #8: Create a simple user experience for all roles

In an academic setting, 360s touch four roles: students, faculty, raters and administrators. Create a good user experience for every role.

For students, provide information and feedback throughout the course to orient them to the process and value of the 360s.

For raters, streamline the process as much as possible. Select a 360 platform that can integrate smoothly with your school's IT infrastructure, so that outside raters can log into the system as easily as faculty or students.

For faculty, provide training so they can monitor the progress of the 360 in real time, and send out electronic reminders to anyone falling behind in the process. Show them how to send these reminders only as needed, and only to those who are running late.

For administrators, select a platform with advanced features to make setting up and managing 360s and generating the final reports fast and efficient.

Best practice #9: Document the 360s for both administrators and faculty

People come and go; so good documentation helps ensure continuity. Plan to prepare two types of documentation for two different audiences:

- a *360 Review Operations Guide* for IT, and
- a 360 *Review Teaching Guide* for faculty.

Use this documentation to support the on-boarding and training of any new faculty and 360 administrators.

Five technical tips on managing 360 reviews in an academic setting

Here are five best practices of a more technical nature that emerged from the experience of Babson College.

Tip #1: Integrate the 360 platform with your existing security, authentication and SSO methods

Any 360 review platform in an academic setting must support more flexible security than in a corporate setting.

To start, raters come from hundreds of different companies all over the world, rather than all from the same company.

Select a 360 review platform that can integrate smoothly with Active Directory so that these outside raters can be authenticated as easily as any internal staff member or student.

Set up outside contacts with the same Single Sign-On privileges as a teacher or student. This removes another barrier that could lower the 360 response rates.

Tip #2: Send e-mails to raters from a recognized faculty member

Experience has shown that e-mails to raters from a generic address, such as "360manager@babson.edu" risk getting caught in corporate spam filters.

Instead, personalize the Subject or From lines with each student's name, and include the professor's signature line.

Tip #3: Keep clickable URLs short

Some 360 software generates clickable URLs as long as 256 characters each. These can easily be chopped up by the receiver's e-mail client into multiple lines that are awkward to copy into a browser.

This can frustrate raters and detract from the response rate. Use a short URL that stays in one piece and is easy to click.

Tip #4: Set interim and fallback deadlines

The need for flexibility around deadlines arises often in a learning environment.

Faculty must set deadlines for students to have all their raters invited and all their questionnaires completed.

But behind the scenes, 360 administrators should not set any fixed deadlines. So when a student needs more time, an administrator can be flexible without making any major changes to the system.

Tip #5: Thoroughly test the 360 process before going live

360 reviews happen quickly and frequently in an educational setting, so it can be easy to lose sight of QA when bringing a new system online.

Before you do, proofread all e-mails and boilerplate carefully. Verify that the data being collected will support the reports you request.

And exercise the system with a 360 test-run before using it with a class of students.

Conclusions

The combination of close teamwork and powerful technology such as the Blue/360 system from eXplorance has made 360 reviews a valuable part of the business curriculum at Babson College.

This white paper has described 14 best practices for administering and managing 360 reviews in an academic setting.

These range from the concrete detail of "keeping clickable URLs short" to the philosophical injunction to "give students sole ownership of their 360 results."

Any academic institution that reviews and implements these best practices will have an easier time using 360 reviews in appropriate courses.

For more information...

Find out more about how your organization can implement and automate 360 feedback reviews, and email info@eXplorance.com or call +1.514.938.2111.