

How to Get Better Buy-in for Your Next 360

An interview with Dr. Elizabeth Fried

by Angie Gallop, [eXplore](#)



Author, consultant and executive coach Dr. Elizabeth Fried is a renowned expert on workplace behaviour and how to manage it.

Aside from running a successful HR consulting firm, she regularly gives speeches and has been quoted in *Business Week*, *Fortune*, *Ms.*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*.

Companies can spend thousands on consultants to create 360-degree surveys, but still suffer from low response rates. Do you have to accept this as a fact of life? Or, is there anything you can do to make your surveys more relevant?

According to Dr. Elizabeth Fried, if you involve people in the survey design, and do an effective job of communicating the purpose from the very beginning, they'll be more likely to fill it out, and you'll get more relevant results.

During a lively discussion with *eXplore*, she shared a very practical process for designing a 360 survey, her two favourite survey questions, and tips on how to train staff to write useful comments.

What turns people off answering a survey?

When it is too long and the questions aren't relevant.

How can you avoid this problem?

People think they need to ask everything. Really, they need to focus on the questionnaire design. It's critical to get your intended raters and subjects involved, particularly when you are doing a 360-degree survey.

How can a company get people involved in the survey design?

When I go to a company, I take the president and maybe three people from the top executive team. I get them to think about their vision, mission, business strategy; and the key competencies they need to

carry these out. Then, I provide them with about 300 questions that I commonly use to target key competencies, and ask them to pick out 50 of these.

I get them to take the 50 questions they've chosen to, for instance, the managers who are going to be evaluated using this survey. They ask these managers to think about the company's vision and mission, and then pick out 25 of the questions about key competencies from the 50.

Why do you do this?

It is very efficient. I've talked to a lot of consultants, and I remember one who charged companies \$12,000 to select questions. I don't think that's necessary. You can get to the same result quickly using the method I've outlined. Then people have a feeling they have contributed. In this way, you give people credit for being smart.

Also, you are not going to have any irrelevant questions, because people have thought through what is important to carrying out the overall business strategy.

Questions chosen by the people involved in the survey are just as effective as those chosen by a more objective third party?

Yes, because it allows for content validity. What makes these people's choices content-valid is that the behaviors measured in the survey are directly linked to the vision, mission, and business strategy of the company — those over-arching principles on which the company is run.

Furthermore, when people go on to be surveyed, there are no surprises about the questions because they had their hand in picking them. This helps the buy-in process.

What survey format do you generally use?

I generally allow 25 to 28 rating questions with an opportunity to comment, and then a couple open-ended questions at the end, because I like the survey to end on a high note.

Also, it is critical to categorize the questions under topics. So, if you have questions on presenting, listening, and being clear when making requests, then you would categorize these under "Communications."

You should have at least three questions per category.

Why 25 to 30 questions?

Typically, a person can thoughtfully respond to three Likert-scaled questions per minute. Likert-scaled questions are where, for instance, people are asked to rate their colleague's skill on a scale of one to five. So if you have 30 of these questions, the survey should take 10 minutes.

But, if you want to have comments after each question, you basically have to triple that time, so it is going to take about 30 minutes to complete the survey.

If you go longer than that, the survey becomes laborious. You don't want that.

What do you mean by ending the survey on a "high note?"

I use two questions that I have been testing, and the results have been excellent.

The concept behind them is called "appreciative inquiry." These questions focus on what is working, rather than what is *not* working.

If you focus on what *is* working and strengthen that, then what is *not* working often becomes a non-issue.

So, my typical survey ending questions are: "Describe any actions or behaviours you have observed about this person that have inspired, impressed or motivated you." Here we are focusing on what a person does well.

Then, I wanted to take it a step further, so I follow it with this question— and this is my favourite: "Imagine for a moment that this person is performing as the ideal leader. Specifically describe what you would like to see him or her do in the future to inspire you

personally or to help make the organization great.” (You could substitute ‘leader’ with ‘team member’ or ‘employee.’)

When you word the questions in terms of “what could they do” rather than “what should they stop doing,” it causes the people to really think about what they would like to see happen.

Any other survey pitfalls that people should be wary about?

Whenever possible, ask only one question at a time. For example, if you ask your respondent to rate whether the subject “administers all policies fairly and communicates them clearly,” one half of this question has to do with fairness, the other has to do with communication.

The problem is, a person might do a very fair job of administering a policy, but a very poor job of communicating it. I see this problem on performance appraisals a lot.

Are there any other things a company can do to make a 360 survey successful?

The key to successfully conducting a survey is the upfront communication about why you are doing it in the first place.

Typically, when I am working with a client, we have a very thorough communication about what a 360 is, what it is intended to do, and what it is not intended to do.

And basically, we make it clear that it is designed to help with that person’s development *and not* intended to give somebody a “shot” or to make somebody feel bad.

How do you encourage people to write helpful comments?

We teach people how to write behavioural comments with compassion. We teach them to frame their comments with a tone that shows a genuine desire to help the subject of the survey.

Often comments can be very general in nature, for example “Joe is a great guy.” But this is not very useful. How can we help people to avoid giving general responses?

We give people a 15- to 20-minute primer on how to write behavioural comments. You don’t just say, “Joe is a great guy.” Instead, it is helpful to think, “If I were writing a screenplay and had to give instructions about how Joe behaves, what would I write?”

You might want to say, “Joe is an excellent communicator.” But then again, that doesn’t tell me much of anything.

You’d need to say, “When Joe communicates, he actively listens by checking for understanding, by giving you his full attention, by turning his Blackberry off...” things like that tell me much more.

Similarly with negative comments.

A helpful comment would be, “I know Joe cares about me because he always leaves his door open. Unfortunately, he lets the phone interrupt and checks his Blackberry. He gets distracted by these things and I feel like I’m not being listened to.”

This sounds like it could turn into a group psychology session within a business, don’t you think?

We are not talking about mental states. We are talking about people’s outward behaviour and the impact of that outward behaviour. It is very important to be clear that this is not a psychological assessment or exercise.

360 feedback is an opportunity to find out how you are doing from your full circle of influence. Your circle may include your boss, your direct reports, your peers, and your internal or external customers. You also conduct a self-assessment, allowing you to compare your perceptions to those of others.

When others provide responses to a 360 questionnaire, the recipient receives a true gift.

These people don't have to tell you how you are doing. They could be silent and let you derail your career on your own!

The opportunity to get this information gives you a real advantage.

Once armed with this behavioural feedback, you can create a development plan to change your behaviour and move with real clarity toward success.

You can learn more about Dr. Fried, her business, and the resources she has to offer at www.TheLearningEngine.Org and www.MyExecutiveCoach.net.

She offers a complimentary one-week pass to a highly interactive, engaging, and fun online course entitled "Essential Skills of Communication."