To 360, or not to 360? That is the question. And an important question for an organization to consider before using 360-degree feedback. Done properly, 360-degree feedback programs can focus individual development, promote a climate of open communication, and increase job effectiveness which can result in positive performance outcomes. However, improperly planned and implemented 360-degree feedback can at best be a waste of time for participants, and at worst can cause corporate revenge reminiscent of Shakespeare’s Hamlet. So how can you design a 360-degree program to maximize the benefits and avoid the pitfalls?

At Assess Systems™, we have been designing and implementing development solutions for over two decades. Here are a few recommendations we would suggest in planning programs using 360-degree feedback to avoid the pitfalls that cause programs to fail:

Explore the reasons for the program. As you’ll agree, ‘It’s the latest industry trend’ is not a good reason to incorporate 360 feedback. 360-degree feedback has become a trend because organizations have found them to be a useful tool to give employees a realistic view of their performance through the perceptions of important organization stakeholders (e.g. their boss, peers, direct reports, customers, and including themselves), but that in itself is not a reason to implement 360. If, however, your organization desires to give employees performance feedback in a developmental environment to maximize job effectiveness and guide career development, 360-degree feedback can be a positive addition to your talent management process.

Align the 360 feedback survey with the organization vision and strategy. It is key to create a feedback survey tool that translates organization strategy into the behavioral requirements for the role. This will help participating employees understand the expectations of their role and thus increase the likelihood of their success. Assess Systems™ approach to ensuring this alignment is to define success through competency models based on organizational strategy. Through a competency modeling process with your company leaders, competencies and behaviors can be derived for a 360-degree feedback tool that are pertinent to the company as a whole and speak to the...
requirements of the role itself. In addition, since leaders are involved in the process of defining success it is possible to gain the support needed for the success of the program.

Communicate the program to help alleviate uncertainty and trust issues. Employees may have never been through a 360 feedback process before and may have some understandable apprehension… or worse, they have been through a 360 event and been left with some negative impressions. In either case, it is critical to establish the expectations from the event. Set forth answers at the onset of the program to questions like: ‘Why am I being asked to participate in a 360?’, ‘Will there be actions plans that need to put in place?’, and ‘Who at the organization will see the results?’ While flexible technology will assist in the ease of administration and dispersion of information via automated notifications and reminders, establishing the who, what, why, how and when will help allay fears and gain employee buy-in and participation which is essential for the program’s ultimate success.

Make data collection easy. Implementing a 360 program can be burdensome on raters as well. Oftentimes a manager is asked to rate 5-10 direct reports as well as a group of peers. It is important that a rater be as engaged in the process for the first person he/she rates as for the last person. Otherwise not everyone will receive high quality feedback. Again, using flexible technology can assist with making the 360 process user friendly and less arduous for raters and respondents. We have found that allowing the rater to rate multiple people at a time (against the same competencies) streamlines the process and encourages better discrimination among ratings.

Carefully plan how the feedback will be delivered to participating employees. Even more important than the technology is the means through which the feedback is delivered. One-on-one coaching, group workshops, or a hybrid of these options are the best way to make sure the 360-degree feedback is properly received and understood. Remember that 360 Feedback is only the beginning of the conversation. Participants should be coached to appropriately follow-up with respondents to gain a deeper understanding of the information, identify best practice behaviors for the future, and create a development plan for improved job effectiveness.

Follow-up after the event. One major complaint from raters that dedicate their time to completing 360 is ‘Nothing came of it…’ Consider what you identified and established as the outcome of the program. If it was goal setting and action planning, be sure you have some way holding individual accountable for their development and then gather additional feedback to see the success of the event. Maintaining momentum is often a challenge for participants. Good intentions are often waylaid by busy schedules. At Assess Systems we have found that providing participants with a systematic method (a mini 360) for gathering feedback on development progress at short intervals (3-6 months) after the initial feedback helps them to stay focused, refine actions and achieve success. Data from this follow-up 360 also provides the organization with metrics to evaluate the success of the program through observed behavior change.

So is 360-degree feedback right from your company? If your answer is yes, it will be much easier with the right planning and right tools. A well devised and implemented 360 development program will reap benefits and can lead to an organizational masterpiece.