

**How 360 degree feedback practices create  
positive or negative participant  
perceptions of the process.**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements of the University of  
Brighton for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy**

**March 2011**

**The University of Brighton**

## Abstract

360 degree feedback is widely used by employing organisations but peoples' views of how successful it is vary from individual to individual and from organisation to organisation. Successful experiences of 360 degree feedback can have a powerful effect on performance, retention and development. When 360 degree feedback is unsuccessful within organisations there appears to be a damaging effect on employee engagement factors like motivation, organisational commitment and morale. It is therefore important to gain a better understanding of what differentiates more successful experiences of 360 degree feedback from less successful ones. This thesis seeks to answer the question, what makes the difference between 360 degree feedback experiences perceived by participants as successful and those that are not?

The research looked at 11 case studies. Each case is a separate organisation. 84 participants were interviewed across the organisations. This provided the opportunity to see 360 degree feedback working in different settings. Using a grounded theory approach, interview transcripts were coded and emergent themes identified through intra-case analysis and further refined by inter-case comparisons. Finally, existing research into culture and feedback were examined to explore whether they could be applied to these findings.

Individual reactions to 360 degree feedback are affected by several interacting factors, namely; Feedback Intervention Theory, Feedback Culture, Leader-Member Exchange, Perceived Organisational Support and Organisational Justice. A 'virtuous circle' model was developed of the interactions between these factors.

If all the factors of the proposed model are present and working together, the factor which seems to have most influence on overall success is the availability and quality of dialogue between the employee and the person facilitating the feedback.

The general consensus amongst researchers and practitioners in the 360 degree feedback field is that 360 degree feedback works best in a 'supportive environment'. How much support is provided varies across organisations. The model developed in this thesis casts light on the parameters of that supportive environment and the relationships between them. The combination of interactions between the identified factors constitutes the overall environment of support perceived by the employee as they experience the 360 degree feedback process.

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## **Acknowledgements**

Undertaking this PhD has been a significant project over a long time and getting to this point certainly hasn't been through just my own efforts. It would not have been possible to complete this thesis without the considerable patience, commitment and support of many people, not only from those at the University of Brighton but also from friends, family and colleagues.

I had enormous help and guidance throughout from Tom Bourner and from Sue O'Hara, who have been consistently painstaking and thorough in their suggestions, critiques, and feedback. To have done all that, and to have always done it so constructively, over such an extended period has been greatly appreciated. It is also a remarkable feat of endurance. Thanks must go to Steve Reeve who added to the supervisory mix in the later stages and provided valuable advice and momentum. I am grateful also to those behind the supervisory team at the University for their patient support and direction: to the Thesis Panel and to Jo Lucas, for making sure that things were done when they should have been.

Those I want to thank from outside the University include friends and family, who have shown patience and understanding throughout, not only of the work itself but also the ever-growing pile of papers, documents, notes, and other signs of work in progress. Thanks particularly to Mum and Dad for their interest and support and it is a particularly sad thing for me that Dad could not see this work come to fruition.

Finally, many thanks must go to the many people from the various organisations that were involved who volunteered to be interviewees. There were not only a lot of interviewees, who willingly gave of their time to talk to me, but there were also those who acted as 'gatekeepers' and made the interviews possible.

**Declaration**

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

Signed .....

Dated .....

## **Definitions and abbreviations**

Below are the more important terms used but not fully defined in the text. These are my ‘working’ definitions to provide an overview of their intended meaning within this thesis only. They are not intended as exhaustive descriptions.

### **(1) Change Management**

At the time of writing, organisational changes are frequent and widespread in all economic sectors. Managing the organisations (their strategies, systems and people) and designing and implementing the adaptation required has become an area of organisational development (see below) that has its own methods, professional status and terminology.

### **(2) Employee Engagement**

Employing organisations want greater productivity from staff and in exchange employees want their various needs to be met by their employer. The engagement of employees is seen to be instrumental in getting greater productivity and is thought to be obtained by tapping into these needs

### **(3) Human Resources (H.R.)**

A broad definition, no longer regarded as being simply ‘personnel management’. Whilst still encompassing the administrative management of employees, in recent years the HR function has moved to become more involved in the strategic planning of organisations through its contributions to change, development and resource planning.

### **(4) Management Development**

This term is intended to cover the learning by managers of skills and competencies and it also includes ‘leadership development’ for the purpose of this thesis. Management Development activity overlaps with other areas of organisational development, particularly in succession planning and talent management. In this thesis it is used as a general term that may include any of these areas unless stated otherwise.

### **(5) Occupational Psychology**

Here I am using the term as defined by the British Psychological Society, which is:

“...concerned with the performance of people at work and in training, how organisations function and how individuals and small groups behave at work”

**(6) Organisational Culture**

There are many definitions in use. In this thesis I am referring to the behavioural norms of an organisation – the accepted and expected behaviour that is ‘typical’ of the organisation and the associated management practices and systems that provide the framework.

**(7) Organisational Development (O.D.)**

In this thesis I am taking the definition of this field as a planned effort to increase organisational effectiveness which is organization-wide, managed from the top using planned interventions in the organization's 'processes' and using behavioural-science. This is derived from a definition by Beckhard (1969).

**(8) Performance Management**

I use of the term in this thesis to describe the overall environment in which people’s work performance is controlled, tracked, monitored and rewarded. It is a broader term than ‘performance review’ or ‘appraisal’ although it includes these activities. An aim of performance management is to show clear links between the work and achievements of an individual with the goals of the employing organisation.

**(9) Personal Development**

In organisations this refers to the formal learning objectives pursued by individuals in order to improve their abilities, particularly in relation to their existing role or in preparation for a job move. The formality can be given structure by the setting down of these objectives in a ‘Personal Development Plan’ (PDP). Personal development is taken here to include all applications of learning within an organisation or job: management, leadership or other job-related skills and knowledge.

## Chapter One Introduction

*O would some power the giftie gie us, to see ourselves as others see us.*

Robert Burns, Poem "To a Louse" - verse 8

### 1.1 Synopsis

The chapter sets out the aims of the study and the origins of the research question. It briefly outlines some aspects that will be addressed in more detail in later chapters and, where this is the case, clearly signposts them. The chapters of the thesis are summarised here also, to give an overview of the study from its review of relevant literature through to the generation of the concluding theory that attempts to explain why people respond to 360 degree feedback in the ways that they do.

This thesis examines participant perceptions of their 360 degree feedback experiences. Perception is a process of interpreting information (Quick and Nelson, 1997:83) and is therefore “...an important modifier of the cognition process by which people interpret the stimuli they face in their environment” (Luthans, 1998:141). Perception is the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting environmental information through which people give meaning to their environment and, as a result of this interpretation, people develop feelings and attitudes. And dependent upon these is behaviour (Rao and Narayana, 1998:329). The present study explored reactions through the perceptions described by participants and examining the subsequent use of the 360 degree feedback to set out a development plan and to develop positive intent towards making improvements in performance.

This was a theory-building investigation. A literature review at the outset of the investigation revealed a gap in the 360 degree feedback literature. This gap concerned understanding of how participant reactions would develop through their experience of 360 degree feedback interventions, and the consequent likelihood of them using the feedback for improvement in performance or for professional development. The association of these participant reactions and levels of employee engagement criteria is also not well understood. The review of the literature of Chapter 2 will set out the research domain and the gaps that prompted the current study. The qualitative methods of the current study yielded findings which suggested that theoretical frameworks from other literature domains

would provide an overarching theory that explains reactions. This provided the basis for a second literature review, in order to integrate the current study's findings with this additional research literature.

## **1.2 Aims of the investigation**

This thesis addresses the question of what it is that makes the difference between 360 degree feedback experiences perceived by participants as successful and those that are not.

It is important to know why reactions to 360 degree feedback may vary because organisations invest considerable budgets on 360 degree feedback and the return on this investment is not always apparent. Literature in the domain does not provide an obvious method to predict beforehand that a particular performance feedback approach will work well under particular conditions. Also, interest in whether there is a damaging effect on important employee engagement factors like motivation, organisational commitment and morale and, as a consequence, on performance and retention when 360 degree feedback is poorly introduced or managed within organisations, motivates this research.. .

This project looked at what made people's experiences of 360 degree feedback feel successful and positive. Participant perceptions of their experiences were therefore explored. One basic assumption, shared by many HR and OD practitioners is that feedback *per se* is a good way of getting people to change their work behaviour. As we see in Chapter Two, this 'common-sense' assumption does not always stand up to scrutiny.

## **1.3 The question**

The research question was developed after much reflection on personal experience and practice, academic study, reading, and discussion at the University of Brighton. It arose firstly from my practitioner perspective, as a consultant using 360 degree feedback as a diagnostic and management development tool. It was further refined from the researcher perspective, as my initial experientially situated views were supplemented by immersion in literature, methods and discussions with other scholars in the field.

The research question is: '*What is the difference that makes the difference between 360° feedback experiences perceived by participants as successful and those that are not?*'

The question addresses perceptions of 360 degree feedback experience by participants, and this is regarded here as a ‘cognitive evaluation of an experience’. Perception can be defined as the way that a situation is categorized or defined by the person and ‘*roles, well-learned habits and over-arching goals will impact how the situation is perceived*’ (Satsangi *et al*, 2003:576). That is, perceptions of the same experience by different people can differ. It is part of the current study’s aim to explore whether these perceptions can be moderated in some way, by understanding the range of perceptions that arise amongst participants and what it is about their experience that may influence them. Social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001; Rogers, 1951) suggests that although people may share a common objective experience, their differing roles can also lead to discrepant perceptions of the environment. Furthermore, social ecological theory (Bronfrenbrenner, 1979:264) suggests that factors at multiple levels within an environment may influence perceptions of the experience. These contextual elements are investigated in this study, as are the personal differences that may affect cognitive evaluation.

Furthermore, Toral *et al* (2009) suggested that feelings of satisfaction relate to perceptions of being able to achieve success and the feeling of achieving desired outcomes. Positive perceptions and associated feelings of satisfaction with the 360 degree feedback experience are therefore an indicator of positive outcomes of the process.

The purpose of this study was to elicit information that would effectively address the question. By asking this research question I aim to discover:

- what are the factors that most influence participants’ perceptions of 360 degree feedback,
- whether these factors can be used to develop an explanatory theory of the way in which people react,
- whether a theory built in this way has the potential to generalise beyond the domain of the present study.

#### **1.4 The practitioner justification for interest in the field**

The research described in this thesis was stimulated by professional curiosity. Having been a practitioner I had noticed variable responses to 360 degree feedback amongst those people who had experienced it, not just in relation to whether the feedback itself was

positive or negative. Reactions varied even when people were happy with the detail of their feedback and the data-collection instruments, reports, and design of the process. I discovered these opinions by asking participants their views after their 360 degree feedback encounters, not just immediately after receiving the feedback but also later, when they were expected to be working on development plans. All this suggested to me as a practitioner that neither the design of the process nor the feedback itself were the only things that affected people's opinions about the overall experience. This was the stimulus that motivated me to find out more about what it is that 'makes the difference'. As a practitioner I began to explore this problem by looking at academic research literature concerning 360 degree feedback. The bulk of the research at that time was quantitative and hypothesis testing, using the numerical data generated by 360 degree feedback questionnaires to compare mean scores between rater groups and to examine the changes in mean ratings over time. Many studies were located in one organisational setting and collected only quantitative data.

A smaller number of studies had reported on the antecedents of positive participant reactions to 360 degree feedback. Definition of the organisational context in which the process takes place appeared integral to understanding behavioural responses. I decided to view the problem as one based on social context, which plays a role in how participants react.

As a method of assessment, I had found during my work as a consultant in the field that 360 degree feedback is not always welcomed by participants. I have seen also that if they do not like the process they are much less likely to use their results to go on to the next step, which is to improve in those areas highlighted as development needs. These observations are also supported by evidence from the literature on the subject, such as Smither *et al* (2004:48) and McCarthy and Garavan (2007:914).

The academic importance of addressing this question is described below. For practitioners, addressing this question will cast light on how to make it more likely that an investment in management assessment through 360 degree feedback will yield a return in terms of their development and improvement. Those people who found the experience satisfying seemed to use their feedback productively and keep to subsequent development plans. Those who were less satisfied seemed less engaged and were more likely to let things drop.

## **1.5 The academic justification for interest in the field**

There is a literature reporting different types of investigation into the effectiveness of 360 degree feedback. Some of this literature examines the properties of the instruments and performance measures used. Other studies look at participant reactions and the antecedents and consequences of experiences of 360 degree feedback. There is no explanatory theory within the 360 degree feedback literature which predicts the likely outcome (in terms of participants' satisfaction with the process). This thesis represents an attempt to locate the research question within the area of the literature where such theory-assertion considering the prediction of outcomes of participants' satisfaction with the 360 degree process is missing or partial, and to use appropriate methods to develop theory that would account for participant reactions to 360 degree feedback.

Perhaps because of the use of numerical scale ratings as the main data for feedback, research into 360 degree feedback has largely been carried out using a positivist philosophy of enquiry including, for example, the quantitative studies which investigate rating variance and correlations (Antonioni and Park, 2001:479). The same philosophy also applies to many of the qualitative studies, where pre-formed ideas and hypotheses are tested in some way (Johnson and Cassell, 2001). The epistemological arguments are considered further in Chapter Three, Section 3.3.

At the heart of the question there is the participant's 'reaction to 360 degree feedback'. These reactions are the result of perceptions that people have. In this study, perception is regarded as the process by which people make sense of something in their surroundings (Pearn, 2002: 36). These perceptions are the building blocks of the attitudes that participants develop (Luthans, 1998; Purrezhat and Someh, 2009:99), in this case towards the 360 degree feedback process. To generate a theory from addressing the research question, a grounded theory method of qualitative research was adopted. The full justification for selecting this set of techniques is described in chapter 3. The approach was used for exploring people's feelings about their experiences and eliciting factors that seemed to be most important to them during these experiences of 360 degree feedback.

## **1.6 Personal reasons**

I began this work with the intention and motivation of knowing enough about 360 degree feedback to write a book on the subject, a book that would be of interest to practitioners and to scholars.

Aside from the research described in journals, in the more ‘practitioner-friendly’ publishing domain, most books covering 360 degree feedback describe mainly the project management aspects rather than giving the full picture of the technique and its context. This seems to me to represent a gap which could usefully be filled by a book about 360 degree feedback (and other types) described in a more holistic way. This is another reason for my research: it will provide material for such a publication.

## **1.7 The concluding theory and its contribution to knowledge**

Pettigrew (1995) emphasises the need for management research to have value for practitioners in the field of management. Kurt Lewin wrote that “there is nothing so practical as a good theory” (Lewin, 1951:169). This study intends to develop theory from the academic researcher perspective. The subsequent theory is intended to be of value not only by contributing to academic literature on 360 degree and performance feedback, but also by providing practitioners with grounded and empirically based advice on how best to apply 360 degree feedback.

The conclusion of this study was the derivation of new theory. The theory suggests that people form their overall views about their 360 degree participation experience through their perceptions of distinct aspects of organisational context. These perceptions range from those created as they receive feedback on their performance, through those caused by their experience of the follow-up to the feedback, to those induced by their experience of fairness, and support.

This new model is located at the intersection of several literatures, and the nature of these literatures and the heuristic rationale for exploring them is described fully in chapter 5. The hierarchical interaction between these factors is an important distinction between this theory and others that have been reported in the 360 degree feedback literature. The critical contribution made by this model is to suggest a synergistic, rather than additive, interaction

between the factors and the implications for not only optimal design of 360 degree feedback systems but also for potential benefits to the organisation through the positive correlation between perceptions of 360 degree feedback and staff engagement indices.

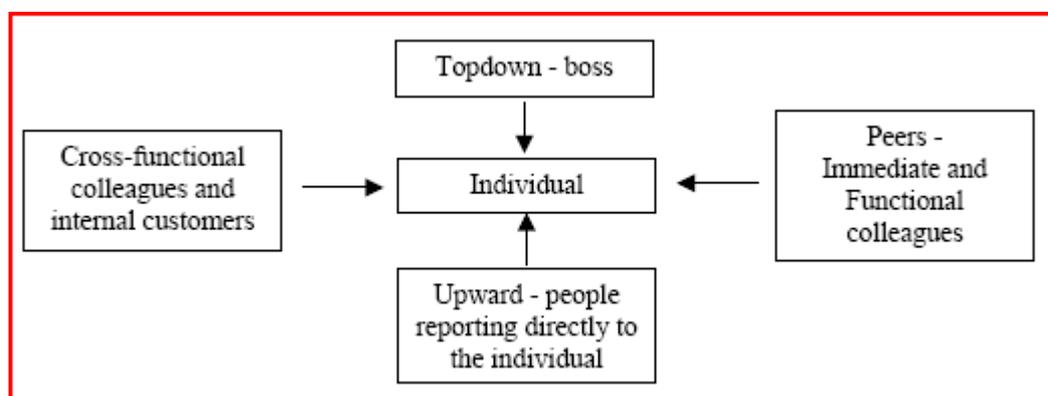
### 1.8 The field – 360 degree feedback

360 degree feedback is a widely used method for collecting performance assessments from a range of people. It expands upon the traditional ‘top down’ views from a person’s boss gathered for example during annual performance reviews. The four primary sources include (a) the manager’s boss, (b) the manager’s subordinates or direct reports, (c) the peers or the customers of the target, and (d) the self (the participant).

The information can be used in different ways, such as providing it as feedback to the subjects of the assessment so that they can plan their personal or professional development. It can also be used as an administrative tool, collecting performance data for use in succession planning or appraisal decision-making. Sometimes it is used for several of these purposes at the same time (Morgeson *et al*, 2005).

The ‘360 degree’ part of the term relates to the fact that the different assessors contributing their evaluations represent positions ‘above, below and alongside’ the level of the participant in the organisational hierarchy. The ‘feedback’ in the term refers to the fact that the results are made known to the participant in some way.

A simple schematic of the 360 degree process is shown in figure 1, where arrows indicate direction of feedback from the giver to the receiver.



**Figure 1 The 360 degree feedback process**

The term ‘feedback’ is used in different ways in different fields of study. It was originally used in physics and chemistry to describe the self regulation of a system such as an engine or chemical reaction. In these cases if some quantity becomes too great, a signal comes back to the system to reduce it (negative feedback). If a quantity becomes too small, a signal increases it again (positive feedback). The quantity is therefore kept at a fairly constant level. Feedback in this sense is a control mechanism.

In some ways this is similar to the notion of feedback as used in Human Resource Management, Occupational Psychology, and general management terminology. For this thesis I am defining feedback as *the information provided to a person during or after an activity that enables the person to assess the success or failure of his or her performance.*

For every organisation that uses it, 360 degree feedback can represent a significant investment of effort, time, and money. It can also have an indirect impact on employee engagement, positively if it goes down well, negatively if badly received (McCarthy and Garavan, 2001:14)). Consequently, it is worth considering how to make the best use of it, but whilst there have been many studies on its efficacy (for example McCarthy and Garavan, 2007; Smither *et al*, 2005; Bracken *et al*, 2001), there is no generally accepted explanatory theory that predicts the likelihood of its success as an intervention (in terms of its effects on staff engagement or performance improvement). Broad guidance is available from checklists, articles and case study descriptions (such as Ward, 1997:48-50), but these tend to veer towards the project-management implications of running 360 degree feedback programmes, and they can offer no guarantee that the 360 degree element will be regarded positively by participants and that the feedback will subsequently be discussed as part of a development plan. Or that the development plan will be adhered to. The study described here uses a detailed empirical analysis of working practices, as seen through the eyes of participants, as the foundation of a predictive theoretical framework of 360 degree feedback perception.

Despite considerable investment into 360 degree feedback by employing organisations and the now widespread use of the method, 360 degree feedback programmes are not always as successful as they could be; people can be demotivated or discouraged by their experience and do not make serious attempts to act on their feedback results. Smither *et al* analysed the results of 24 longitudinal studies and warned that ‘*Practitioners should not expect*

*large, widespread performance improvements after employees receive 360 degree feedback'* (Smither *et al*, 2005:33). A 2001 Watson Wyatt (commercial company report) study found that 360-degree feedback was associated with a 10.6 percent decrease in market value. John Sullivan, professor of HR management at San Francisco State University, stated that "*there is no data showing that [360-degree feedback] actually improves productivity, increases retention, decreases grievances, or is superior to forced ranking and standard performance appraisal systems*" (Pfau and Kay, 2002: 56)

Similarly, Siefert *et al* (2003: 562) state that there is little evidence that the 360 degree process results in change. Despite this kind of research evidence, practitioners and managers in organisations tend to assume that incorporating 360 degree feedback will improve programmes such as Leadership Development (Nikolaou *et al*, 2006, Bono and Colbert, 2005:175). Understanding the reasons why 360 degree feedback does not have the effect it (potentially) should is one of the reasons for this thesis. These reasons seem to concern how well participating managers respond to and accept the process (McCarthy and Garavan, 2007:914) so it is important for organisations to understand how they can improve the acceptance level of 360 degree feedback.

The theory I build in this thesis makes use of a number of conceptual frameworks to articulate the complex of influences on people's engagement or disengagement with the 360 degree feedback process. The resulting framework has a core focus which is different from others currently used to explain reactions to 360 degree feedback. This core has a number of distinct dimensions, which I will describe in Chapters 5 and 6. The research described here articulates and redefines these dimensions in an attempt to move towards a theory elucidating people's reactions to being participants in a 360 degree programme.

## **1.9 The gap in the literature addressed by this study**

The biggest gap in the research was evidently in the area of thorough qualitative research into the views people had towards their experiences of being subjects of 360 degree feedback. This gap has been reported fairly frequently in the literature (for example: Mabey, 2001; Atwater, *et al*, 2007) but remains the field which still needs examination.

A paper by Maurer *et al* (2002) has touched upon my own research question but has taken a quantitative approach by first selecting and operationalising some variables to use in the

study, rather than the theory-building direction that I have attempted in this project. The outcome of the Maurer study suggested that employee development is not dependent on differences in scores but on other, social and contextual, factors. In this thesis I hope to cast some light on what these other factors are and how they operate.

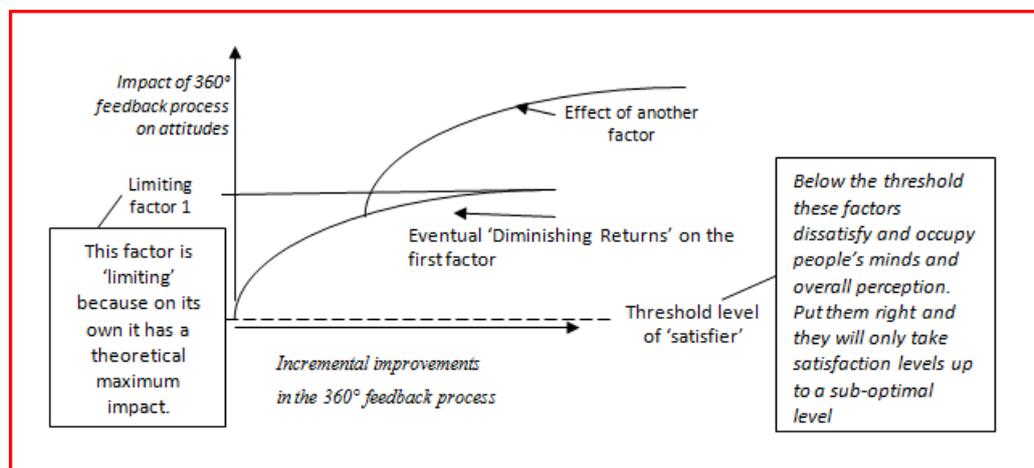
### **1.10 The research – the initial assumptions and an overview of direction**

This investigation looked at 9 case studies. Each case study is of a separate organisation. Spread across the different organisations were 84 participants. This combination provides an opportunity to see 360 degree feedback working in different settings and environments. Each organisation demonstrated different levels of overall ‘success’ for their 360 degree system, and by interviewing participants within each organisation, people were able to express their own views about what had created a successful experience. What ‘Success’ of implementing 360 degree feedback means for the organisation is discussed in the next chapter. What it means for an individual is part of the purpose of my study. Using a Grounded Theory approach, interview transcripts were coded and the emergent themes identified through intra-case study analysis and further refined by inter-case study comparisons. Finally, existing areas of research into culture and feedback were examined to explore whether they were relevant to these findings.

My interviews allowed me to identify a number of factors which seem to be needed as the basis of any successful 360 degree feedback system. At the start of my investigation I had assumed that some factors would lead to motivation and satisfaction with the process but that others would simply be necessary to prevent dissatisfaction with the experience. This assumption stemmed from my practitioner experiences with users and the apparent importance practitioners and 360 degree programme place on such factors as instrument design, wording of questionnaires, length of questionnaire and so on. After 360 degree feedback programmes participants are generally given a short evaluation questionnaire or debrief, as would happen with most training and development activities in many organisations. In general, participants in 360 degree feedback who reported satisfaction with the process do not often cite these qualities as being so important (this point is explored further in the current study). Rather, they would express satisfaction with different things, such as the goals they were able to set or the conversations they could have with their direct reports. The quote attributed to the film director Billy Wilder springs

to mind: *Nobody ever said, "Gee, I must go see that movie, I hear it came in under budget".*

Because of this initial assumption, during my interview analysis I was looking for some factors that could be regarded as ‘hygiene factors’ after Herzberg (1968). Hygiene factors in Herzberg’s theory of motivation are those aspects of work which, when not present or at the right level, cause dissatisfaction. But when they are present, or at a sufficient level, they do not in themselves create satisfaction. I discovered that certain basic factors were apparent, either through their presence or by being lacking in some way, in each of the case-study settings - instrument design, communication about the process, look and feel of the questionnaire, speed of turnaround of reports and others. But in some cases, where the ‘hygiene’ factors were perceived as good, there was still dissatisfaction. And in those where the hygiene factors were failing to impress, people could still feel that their experience was successful. The degree of success experienced by participants varied accordingly. So the additional factors which ‘make the difference’ appear to act separately from these basic hygiene factors in some way. The picture which began to emerge was that once some basic design and access (what I would term as ‘project management’) features were of an appropriate quality then the ‘difference that makes the difference’ can start to exert an effect. Figure 2 below is a graphical illustration of this kind of effect.



**Figure 2** The possible effect of ‘hygiene’ and motivating factors on reactions to 360 degree feedback

So at the outset of the investigation I had a suspicion that some of the criteria that organisations and researchers have used to evaluate the success of 360 degree programmes exert less weight than others. My understanding of the literature suggested that the important factors would not be directly related to the instrument or process itself, but

related in some way to the cultural environment. By looking at similar 360 degree processes in different settings the idea behind the research was that I could identify, and then iron out the ‘hygiene factor’ influence and possibly isolate and identify the variables that ‘make the difference’.

## **1.11 Next steps**

I have defined my research question as: *What is it that makes the difference between 360 degree feedback experiences perceived by participants as successful and those that are 13 not?* How this question was addressed by the research project is described in the following chapters, briefly summarised below.

### **The chapters of the thesis**

**Chapter 1** serves as an introduction to the thesis. It provides a brief synopsis of the background to the study. It outlines the broad research problem and the research question to be addressed and justifies the interest in the topic. There is a brief summary of the methods, the use of literature and the analysis of findings. It concludes with an overview of 360 degree feedback and the likely importance of contextual variables as moderators of participant reactions.

**Chapter 2** presents the review of 360 degree feedback literature. Firstly through a chronological history of its development from early origins and secondly through a review of the literature of the fields of 360 degree feedback and performance measurement where the research overlaps with, and supplements, the work on 360 degree feedback. I examine the literature of occupational psychologists, managers and sociologists working in the fields of 360 degree and performance feedback.

The chapter begins to address the research question by exploring literature that has focused on 360 degree and performance feedback. This presents a theoretical research basis for understanding the factors that affect the success of 360 degree feedback processes. A gap in this literature is identified.

The main domains of research that intersect with my study are:

- The history of the application of 360 degree feedback systems

- The ways in which performance is measured with competency models
- Feedback theories that explain individual disposition and reaction
- Feedback theories which describe social and organisational interactions

**Chapter 3** introduces the methodological perspective employed in this study and discusses the phases and methods of data gathering, the approach to data analysis and the theory-building process of grounded theory.

The research question is explored using qualitative methods. The methods for the enquiry are ethnographic and I will be adopting the stance of '*making the familiar seem strange*' (Hammersley, 2001:207). I attempt a departure from the theory-testing approach. Here I have used grounded theory based on the observations of participants in 360 degree feedback projects (that is, the 'subjects' of the 360 degree feedback).

The data capturing method was by interview, which was of the critical incident format. The justification for the use of this form of data collection when investigating perceptions is given in this chapter. The interviews captured the recollections of participants' experiences of the 360 degree feedback process. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for collation and coding in qualitative research software (NVivo (see Appendix 1)).

A particular combination of qualitative methods was used to examine the research question and this is discussed in chapter 3.

**Chapter 4** introduces the data and their analysis. The chapter is divided into two parts. Chapter 4.1 examines the data by intra-case study analysis to define potentially important factors that affect participant reactions to 360 degree feedback. This captures the participant viewpoints. Chapter 4.2 uses inter-case study analysis to explore the interaction of these factors with their organisational settings. This exploration is from the researcher perspective.

The emergent factors and the variations in participant responses to 360 degree feedback are summarised at the end of this chapter. The empirical findings are summarised throughout with representative comments from interviews and data displays.

**Chapter 5** reviews the various findings from the research and examines them in the light of the literature review. Reflections arising from the data and the initial literature review are used to generate new questions, which are retrospectively asked of the data that had already been gathered. Examining the data from these new perspectives provided additional analytical perspectives.

This examination concludes that a broader review of research domains is required to locate some of the findings within theoretical frameworks. This is because some of the factors appear to interact with each other and the origins and results of these interactions are not explored fully in the literature that is purely focused on 360 degree and performance feedback, which are the domains reviewed in Chapter 2.

The discussion chapter proposes a theoretical model for explaining reactions to 360 degree feedback. The theory proposes that participant perceptions of specific organisational context factors play an important part in determining reactions to taking part in 360 degree feedback programmes. Furthermore, these perceptions can interact synergistically to generate positive attitudes and intentions to use the feedback for performance improvement.

**Chapter 6** describes the conclusions of the research. The new theoretical model is summarised and the importance of its contribution to the field emphasised. The implications of applying the new theory are discussed and some ideas for further research directions are suggested. The limitations of the study are also considered in this chapter.

## **Chapter Two            Background and Literature Review**

*Like performance appraisals and assessment centres, 360 degree feedback depends on the capability to generate reliable data from unreliable sources (that is, people)*

Bracken *et al*, 2001:6

### **2.1. Introduction**

In this chapter I review the literature that reports the strands of research into 360 degree feedback and summarise the way in which 360 degree feedback is applied in organisational settings. The review will set my research question in context, as I describe what is known about the design, use, and operational environment of the 360 degree feedback process, its strengths and weaknesses, and the way in which these are perceived and acted upon by individuals.

### **2.2 Purpose of the Literature Review**

In this section I examine the field of 360 degree feedback from different angles in the academic and practitioner literature. Whilst I focus on those journal articles which concentrate on 360 degree and multi-source feedback, I have also drawn upon work in the general field of performance appraisal where appropriate. There is common ground between these two areas of the literature, particularly in the way that the effectiveness of both types of feedback can be explained by certain feedback theories and also by differences in organisational culture. Because my area of study intersects not only with the specific 360 degree feedback research activity (on the effectiveness of 360 degree feedback interventions within organisations) but also with the investigatory work on the cultural factors that affect responses to feedback, my literature review will cross several disciplines within the field.

Firstly, I describe the literature search and summarise the methods I employed.

### **2.3 Method for the literature search and review**

I began with a 'search profile' (Bourner and France, 2000) to define the scope of my review and to clarify its aims. I decided on a search profile that would include an initial

view of the research field into 360 degree feedback but not to be tied by that body of work. My research question is interdisciplinary in its scope, considering not only the studies on 360 degree feedback *per se*, but also taking into account some of the theories which describe the effect of cultural and personality factors on participants' reactions to receiving feedback.

Being a practitioner in the field of assessment and 360 degree feedback and a member of the British Psychology Society (BPS) and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), I was familiar with those pieces of research that had a bearing on my own work. These were mostly of the 'psychometric' type but they were useful in summarising the seminal work and citing important references. I examined papers from journals held on electronic databases (which made cross disciplinary searching relatively straightforward) and judged their value from their abstracts and their citations.

I visited and talked with a number of workers in the field. Seminar and conference attendance (B.P.S. and professional OD conferences) was also useful in gathering ideas and theories for further consideration in the light of my research question. I also gave presentations (to CIPD groups) on my work in progress and received useful feedback and further references by this route.

Once the core journals (Hart, 2006:27) and publications had been identified I constructed my main review of the literature current at that time. I kept abreast of further developments in the 360 degree feedback field on a regular basis by scanning journal contents as they became published. This allowed me to see a trend in the research emerging: a move away from the specific psychometric analysis that predominated in the late 1990's and early 2000's to a more qualitative examination of the outcomes of 360 degree feedback, and the research that was becoming more focused on the antecedents and consequences of 360 degree feedback. Since my research is in some respects interdisciplinary, following the literature into these important and relevant areas allowed me to integrate them into my thinking and theorising.

## **2.4 Terminology**

Within the literature, 360 degree feedback has been given alternative titles, even though the fundamental process is similar (McCarthy and Garavan, 2001). According to Foster 1

and Law (2006) researchers have been inconsistent when referring to the term 360 degree feedback. Some workers have used '360 degree' and 'multi source' interchangeably and some agree that this is permissible whilst others do not, as summarised by Atwater *et al*, 2002, p. 196-7. For the clarity of the remainder of this thesis I set out below the definitions that I will apply.

Multi source feedback	an individual receives feedback from two or more raters
360 degree feedback	a form of multi-rater feedback where a self-rating is supplemented by ratings from peers, boss, subordinates
270° feedback	multi-rater feedback where one of the '360 degree' angles is absent (often the boss rating)
180° feedback (or upward appraisal)	When a manager gets feedback from only subordinates, often as a supplement to traditional appraisal processes

Despite the fact that 360 degree feedback is a specific form of multi-source feedback, I will use the term 360 degree feedback throughout unless there is a distinct differentiation to be drawn, in which case I will make this clear at that point in the text.

## **2.5 Origins and growth of 360 degree feedback methods**

This study is confined to developments in 360 degree feedback in the UK and USA and considers that the study of its development in other national cultural contexts is beyond the scope of the research. In their study of the use of 360 degree feedback in six countries (Argentina, Australia, China, Slovakia, Spain and the UK), Brutus *et al* (2006) acknowledge that relatively little had been published outside N. America and the UK.

I use the plural of 'origin' deliberately in the heading to this section. It has been interesting to try and pinpoint the emergence of the first instance of 360 degree feedback. It has not been easy to trace its early history (pre-1980). It seems to have emerged from different sources, so tracing the timeline (shown in Figure 3 below, page 31) backwards actually led to divergence rather than convergence towards a specific, original initiative. From the

1990s growth has been rapid and widespread in the UK and USA and currently 360 degree feedback is a compulsory element of senior manager performance management in the entire Civil Service (Whitehouse *et al*, 2007) and is prevalent in the National Health Service, being used for clinical, as well as administrative, staff development (Morgan *et al*, 2005). These are indicators of how much the method has grown since its early days, when it was treated with misgivings by participants and organisations alike.

As I will describe in the review of research in section 2.6 below, an interesting and paradoxical aspect of this growth in use and popularity is that there has been relatively little systematic empirical research on the value that 360 degree feedback adds to people's development or improvement.

The concept of 360 degree feedback stems from the philosophy and practice of performance appraisal, management behaviour and employee involvement (Kettley, 1997). According to Bracken (1998) there appear to be two main origins of 360 degree feedback. Firstly, the running of 'general purpose' organisational surveys seem to have stimulated closer examination of the views held by subordinates about their supervisors, mainly because of the style of questionnaire item that asks for a rating for statements of the form '*My supervisor does X*' or suchlike. Since organisational surveys generally aggregate data so that the results are displayed as overall views, perhaps segregated by level or demographic category, a switch of emphasis could instead compare the views of subordinates and bosses. Edwards and Ewen (2000) suggested that it would be a straightforward step to move from this intermediate stage into a form of 360 degree review that yields information on supervisor behaviour and effectiveness, for organisational development purposes.

The second postulated origin of 360 degree feedback is from its use as a component of management development programmes (Bracken, 1996). It was seen as being particularly useful for delegates on development programmes to have Personal Development Plans as they progressed through training courses. Individual delegates would then take from the course specific learning points, but collectively their development needs would differ. The content of development programmes would still be consistent and constant, but delegates' attention would be particularly focused on those aspects that were specifically relevant to them as individuals. Apart from the economy of scale of providing identical courses for

large management populations, the benefits as perceived by delegates would be in terms of ownership, relevance and focus.

Multi-source appraisal became popular in some organisations in the 1980s and was mostly used as an executive development tool (Coates, 1998). Upward appraisal and peer appraisal did receive some attention in the 1970s and early 1980s (for example in British Airways in 1973 as described in Forbes (1996), but it was not until the 1990s that 360 degree feedback *per se* gained currency. Lepsinger and Lucia (1997) refer to two books published in the late 1980s which they argue got the idea of upward appraisal and multi-source assessment into the mainstream (McCall *et al*, 1988, and Lindsey *et al*, 1987). These books were based on research carried out by the Centre for Creative Leadership (CCL) in Greensboro, North Carolina on management development. The findings that were emphasised in that study are of relevance to this study. They were:

- that feedback is an important element of a person's professional and personal development,
- that the most effective executives are learners. In other words, these executives encourage and welcome opportunities for learning and development,
- and thirdly, that most employees operate in "feedback-poor" environments.

This suggests that feedback can be a useful development tool and that if it is to work it has to be well received, and that the culture, and circumstances, in which the feedback is given are important influences.

Bracken (in Kraut, 1996) cites other factors in the evolution of 360 degree systems. These would have been: the encouragement and demand for participation and empowerment, the rise of larger spans of control, and a general emphasis on customer focus and the consequent need for immediate and relevant feedback in an 'internal customer' working environment. It was in the 1980's that new 'commitment' and 'empowerment' philosophies were gaining ground in management and getting feedback from subordinates would resonate strongly with these new values. A 'facilitative' management style was becoming more common (Gratton and Pearson (1995) as cited by Kettley (1997, p. 4). In addition, Lepsinger and Lucia (1998) suggested that increasing commercial competition in the 1990's and the consequent focus on customer reactions acted as a catalyst for the adoption and popularity of 360 degree feedback. In addition, there were shifts in management structures to flatter hierarchies, which meant that managers interacted less formally with larger numbers of colleagues.

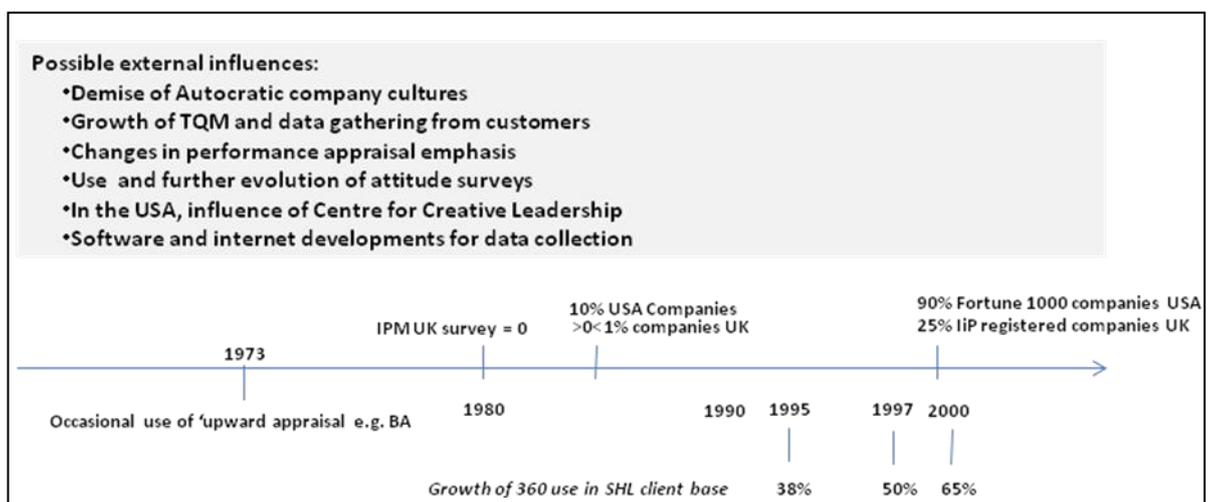
Because of the acknowledgement that the traditional ‘father-based’ assessment was too often perceived as being inaccurate and unfair, there has been a move towards expanding the feedback circle, if not using other colleagues then at least incorporating a self-assessment within the appraisal process. As Brinkerhoff and Kanter reported in 1980: *‘Single measurement systems based on formal checklists and ratings by the supervisor should be confined only to those more routinized (sic) tasks in organisations...As uncertainty grows – or complexity, interdependence, power concerns and/or multiple appraisal concerns grow – then so should the number of additional features and sources of data added to appraisal systems.’*(p.12)

360 degree feedback is now widely used as a survey method for individual and organisation development. A survey by UK consultancy firm SHL Ltd in 1997 showed that nearly all of their 216 respondent organisations either used or intended to use 360 degree review for some kind of individual development. Just under half of the respondent institutions also used the data for some kind of formal appraisal. Redman and Snape (1993) reported that upward feedback (feedback to managers by subordinates, via a questionnaire) was used by the early 1990’s by a few UK companies (for example, W. H. Smith) and then several UK companies (for example, NatWest) went on to incorporate full multi-source feedback into their performance management processes (these companies generally had links with subsidiaries or parent companies in the USA). The American influence is clear (there was an earlier start and also widespread use), with a relatively straightforward subsequent uptake in the UK. But the rate of growth has been slower in continental Europe. Organisational and national cultures play a part in acceptance and use of 360 degree feedback and cultural resistance to giving upward feedback is particularly strong in Asian and Latin American countries (Brutus *et al*, in Bracken *et al*, 2001, p. 433, Brutus *et al*, 2006).

By 2001 usage was estimated at 90 % of the Fortune 1000 firms in the USA and about 25% of the IiP registered companies in the UK (Bracken *et al*, 2001). Overall, since 1990, growth in use has been dramatic (Morgeson, 2005). There has been no recent general update on the trend in the literature, perhaps indicating an acceptance of the method as a general methodology, no longer having a ‘novelty’ image. A gauge for assessing the rapid growth of 360 degree feedback since 2001 is the frequency and volume of internet advertising for 360 degree feedback software services. These advertisements are now widespread and costs for their 360 degree feedback products and services are competitive.

In their Journal, *People Management* (26<sup>th</sup> October 2009), CIPD listed their top 20 assessment providers and their services. 18 of the 20 offered 360 degree feedback: an indicator of its current prevalence as an HR instrument.

The recent increase in usage of 360 degree methods is perhaps more easily illustrated with an approximate timeline. Figure 3 shows a timeline with some of the more often cited surveys and events. The timeline also lists some of the external developments in management and technology that have occurred and which may have influenced the adoption of 360 feedback (these are major business and industrial tools that have developed. For a summary, see Cummings and Worley, 1997; Center for Creative Leadership, <http://www.ccl.org/leadership/index.aspx>).



**Figure 3** Timeline of growth of 360 degree feedback occurrence

This timeline is not intended to represent a definitive and detailed history of 360 degree feedback. Instead it shows some salient milestones and some general trends in its growth.

## 2.6 Theory and practice of 360 degree feedback

My aim with this section is to understand how the research on 360 degree feedback has built up our current understanding and to address these questions:

- What value is 360 degree feedback perceived to add and what factors are involved?
- Why has it developed in popularity to the extent it has?
- Where has the focus of research activity been and why?
- What would be fruitful extensions of the current body of research?

My review of the literature is intended to summarise the current position of the field.

## The range of studies described in the literature

The literature which has examined 360 degree feedback from the late 1980's to the present can be placed into three discrete categories:

- (1) Accounts and survey based research by consultancy firms which promote benefits and point out practical ways of dealing with possible pitfalls (Kanouse, 1998). It is advisable to "*critically assess these accounts because of their likely commercial bias*" (Bach, 2000).
- (2) Hypothesis-testing research into 360 degree feedback schemes, largely by occupational psychologists, which has focused on psychometric properties and degree of correlation between rater scores (Fletcher *et al*, 1998; Kettley, 1997). Properties such as validity, reliability and design were studied using these methods, with one of the variables emerging from this being the degree of self awareness that 360 degree feedback can either measure or develop in participants.
- (3) Studies into the effectiveness of 360 degree feedback, some of which are organisation-based (Handy *et al* (1996), and a study of Brighton and Hove Council, IRS, 2000) and some of which are academic oriented empirical research studies (Mabey, 2001; Good and Coombe, 2009). Some antecedents and consequences of 360 degree feedback have been identified through these lines of enquiry (McCarthy and Garavan, 2007).

There appear to be two offshoots from this research base:

- (1) In the last five years, such has been the growth in use of 360 degree feedback, there has been a further development out of the third category, *viz.* literature that relates to applications of 360 degree feedback *within professional groups*, such as healthcare, engineering, finance and education. I will not attempt to list this large body of literature but examples from the healthcare sector are a study of the use of 360 degree feedback with Doctors (Overeem *et al*, 2009) and the use of 360 degree feedback to aid understanding of clinical expertise (Garbett *et al*, 2007).
- (2) Another body of literature has developed from the fundamental research into the nature of 360 degree feedback. This has taken it as an indicator of some other variable. For example:

- Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe (2005) used quantitative outputs from 360 degree feedback to test proposed new models of leadership
- Atwater and Brett (2006) used 360 degree feedback as a way of exploring employee engagement
- Weyer (2006) looked at the question of whether 360 degree feedback supported the existence of a 'glass ceiling' for women managers.
- McDowell (2008) studied the effect that self awareness, as measured through 360 degree feedback, has on the practice of coaching.
- Vecchio and Anderson (2009) examined relationships between leaders and their subordinates through a 360 degree feedback instrument.

A trend underlying all the later research activity appears to be a greater use of qualitative study rather than the quantitative and statistical and theory-testing approaches of the 1990s and early 2000s.

### **Understanding the effects of 360 degree feedback**

As described in section 2.5, the concept of 360 degree feedback is grounded in the philosophy and practice of performance appraisal, management behaviour and employee involvement. Since the first appearance of 360 degree feedback, its perceived, rather than proven, benefits seem to have driven its increase in popularity (Morgeson *et al*, 2005), although there have been doubts raised about whether such popularity is merited or whether it is a matter of '*faith rather than proven validity*' (Fletcher and Baldry, 1999).

Examples of such perceived benefits are:

- improved standards of leadership, and
- increased "self-awareness" (defined by Fletcher and Baldry (2001) as the degree of congruence between self-ratings and those of others), which have been suggested by several studies (Atwater *et al*, 1995; Reilly *et al*, 1996; Walker and Smither, 1999).

More recently there have been doubts raised about whether the perceived improvements actually occur. Nikolaou *et al* (2006) propose that organisations will assume that there will be a change for the better in leadership skills but that in reality managers may be overloaded with information from 360 degree feedback and that this makes it difficult to analyse and hard to focus on specific improvements. Smither *et al* (2005) found that it

would be unrealistic to expect wholesale changes following 360 degree feedback and they suggest that one of the factors explaining its effectiveness is the receptivity of the recipient to feedback, which affects their intention to change as a result. Waldman and Bowen (1998) go further by emphasising that feedback acceptance consists of being able to accept it as well as being intent on using it. These findings suggest that immediate reaction to 360 degree feedback is an important stage for getting full benefit from the process. According to Atwater and Brett (2005) the immediate reactions that managers have towards 360 degree feedback are important because the way an individual 'feels' about their feedback may influence how, or whether, the individual changes his or her behaviour subsequently. What the literature reveals about reactions to 360 degree feedback is considered in the following section.

### **Reactions to 360 degree feedback: seeing yourself as others see you**

Receiving feedback, whilst useful, is not always well received (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996), and 360 degree feedback is the same in this respect as any other form of feedback. Some of the factors which affect how people receive feedback are connected with personal disposition. For example, self-image can affect feedback reaction. An inflated self image can lead to misunderstanding of colleague's expectations and is associated with poor performance (Yammarino and Atwater, 1993). Self-esteem can also play a part: those with low self-esteem have more extreme emotional reaction to negative feedback than those with high self-esteem (Ilies, de Pater and Judge, 2007). Self-esteem is considered further in Chapter 5. In addition, those with high achievement orientation tend to seek positive feedback and react against constructive feedback but those who focus on understanding how to do a task well seek constructive feedback about how to improve in the future (Janssen and Prins, 2007).

These personal dispositions comprise a variable which cannot be controlled by design of the 360 degree feedback process: dispositions will vary in any group of people being assessed by 360 degree feedback. But there is an opportunity for the moderation of personal reaction by having a facilitator such as the person's boss or a coach (McDowall, 2008). The nature of that relationship then becomes another factor to consider: it is important, as will be discussed in this Chapter, that the reaction to the feedback is positive to get the best outcomes from it.

With 360 degree feedback in particular, the effect of ‘rater source’ becomes a factor to consider. Source and credibility of the feedback is important to those receiving it. Ratings from participants’ managers are regarded as most significant (Bailey and Fletcher, 2002). The effect of different rater sources is considered in more depth in section 2.6.5 below.

The fact that credibility is deemed important begs the question “*are people able to give reliable, unbiased feedback to their colleagues that is based on factual evidence that does not distort the facts?*” (McDowall *et al*, 2009:17). Research in psychology has established that ‘halo’ effects occur, where we continue to regard a person favourably in light of a previous positive experience (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977). There are also ‘horn’ effects which relate to systematic negative bias.

These issues can be partly resolved by training for raters and the use of clear standards and benchmarks. A well designed 360 degree feedback instrument should provide the framework of clear standards through its reliable questionnaire items and standardised rating scales (Fletcher *et al*, 1998).

Gender bias is another possible area of concern, but Milmore, Biggs and Morse (2007) found little evidence of disadvantage against female participants in 360 degree feedback.

Given that people react differently not only to the process of 360 degree feedback but also to the nature of that feedback, it is useful to examine the literature on what has an effect on people’s affective reactions. Brett and Atwater (2001), in their study of reactions to 360 degree feedback, found that responses to negative 360 degree feedback were either anger or discouragement. But they also found that receiving positive feedback did not necessarily result in an overall positive affect (motivation towards the 360 degree feedback). Their later study (Atwater and Brett, 2005) reported that the relative *difference* in ratings between ‘self’ and ‘others’ was significant. That is, for managers who got low ratings in 360 degree feedback (negative feedback), those who agreed with others about their ratings were actually *less* motivated than those who received low ratings but who had over-rated themselves. Although it focuses on managers who have not scored well on the competency measures, this study supports the view that where 360 degree feedback motivates managers it is because of a heightened awareness that others’ perceptions do not agree with self-assessments. That is, a perceived performance ‘gap’, or shortfall, is the trigger: a feature of

Feedback Intervention Theory (Kluger and DeNisi, 2002) and Control Theory (Carver and Scheier, 1981).

It is appropriate here to discuss the literature that has examined the usefulness of self-ratings as a guide to actual performance levels. The psychometric evidence suggests that self-ratings are a less reliable measure than any of the other perspectives used in appraising performance. Self-ratings tend to be more lenient and are not recommended as a sole guide for assessing competence (Folger and Copranzano, 1998; Campbell and Lee, 1988). On the other hand, the fact that there has been an invitation to people to complete self-ratings as part of any performance appraisal seems to encourage positive attitudes towards the process, which suggests that giving people a sense that they have a 'voice' or say in their appraisal is important to them (Folger and Lewis, 1993).

An added dimension to the feedback provided by 360 degree feedback compared to other performance appraisal methods (Assessment Centres are not being considered here because they are appraisals of performance outside the workplace or role) is that the feedback comes from not just one source but from many. The original perceived advantage of 360 degree feedback was that having multiple raters should reduce the danger of individual bias that is associated with single-rater appraisal, where the rater in question is usually the person's boss. Single-rater bias may arise from the following sources:

- relationship issues between rater and appraisee ('halo' and 'horn' effects as described above and as observed by London and Beatty (1993),
- from differences in interpretation of the job requirements, or
- from simply not being in a position to know enough about the work of the appraisee (Longnecker, 1997).

Another source of bias in traditional appraisals is from the fact that most managers dislike giving negative feedback to employees and this leads to people receiving generally inflated ratings on their performance (Folger and Copranzano, 1998:115). Grint (1995) suggested that objectivity in any form of performance appraisal is always going to be unlikely and that having collective responses is a useful alternative to the probable lack of single-rater objectivity. A discussion of the literature on appraisal and 360 degree feedback is included later in this chapter.

Becker and Klimoski (1989) pointed out that for managers (as opposed to non-managers or technicians), finding out about how they are performing can be problematic because of the relative complexity of what they do. Using 360 degree feedback is a way of providing more information. By deconstructing the visible portion of a manager's work into discrete competency indicators it is possible to circulate these for comment, or to collect ratings, from those people who are most likely see these behaviours in action: the manager's peers, colleagues, customers, not just the manager's boss (who may or may not see these day-to-day manifestations of management). Hannum (2007) suggested that 360 degree feedback generally tries to assess quite complex behaviours and, from a psychometric perspective, unless the same constructs are being evaluated it is inappropriate to compare mean scores from different rater sources, which is one of the popular ways of displaying 360 degree results in reports. For example, by having subordinates as raters it is intuitively appealing to think that it will be possible to see if the manager is 'empowering' and delegating effectively (Gratton and Pearson, 1994), but Hannum's argument suggests that 'within-group' consistency (all subordinates who have rated the manager) may not be even, so that variance within the rating group can be wide.

Questions to consider in this type of interpretation are:

- What actually constitutes a significant difference?
- On a five point rating scale is a difference between scoring a 2 for a self rating and an average 2.5 from others significant? To qualify as significant, should it be more than a difference of 0.5 units? Or less?

Psychometric studies use methods such as *t*-tests or Analysis of Variance to compare different mean scores and assess the significance of differences, but in practice people are usually given arbitrary guidelines such as 'look for gaps of half a rating point' and, as the 360 degree feedback report is most often used to identify the biggest two or three gaps, it is usually a question of rank-ordering the gaps and concentrating on the top three, however big they are. For a case-study description of usage, see Kettley (1997), and for a fuller discussion of the psychometric methods of comparison, see Fletcher *et al* (1998). The implications of rating differences are discussed in the following section.

### **The effect on participants of discrepancies between self-ratings and others' ratings**

According to studies of rating variance, the kind of feedback that 360 degree feedback provides is particularly significant in that it allows a participant to see not only how others

see them, but also to quantify differences between those perceptions, including their self perception compared with other people's. Apart from providing the stimulus to improve provided by highlighting any 'negative gaps' (where self-ratings are higher than 'other' ratings), the feedback can theoretically either confirm or develop a sense of self-awareness, which is thought to be an important factor in management learning (Johnson and Ferstl, 1999). This provided the early rationale for individuals to use the ratings from different sources provided through 360 degree feedback (McDowall, 2008; Fletcher and Baldry, 1999). In addition, there is also evidence that development feedback is less likely to be *ignored* if it comes from several sources rather than just a single supervisory source (Smither *et al*, 2005).

With several rater sources (boss, subordinate, peers and others) 360 degree feedback has been seen to create a range of different possible reactions from participants because of the combinations of the kind of feedback received. Yammarino and Atwater (1997) suggest four 'agreement categories':

- 1) In agreement - good (high self-rating for self and others')
- 2) In agreement – poor (Low self-rating *and* low others' ratings)
- 3) Under-rater (Lower self-rating, Higher others' ratings)
- 4) Over-rater (Higher self-ratings, Lower others' ratings)

Bass and Yammarino (1991) found that over-raters (category 4 above) tend to ignore criticism and discount feedback. The second category above (In agreement-poor) also suggests poor outcomes for 360 degree feedback because of the lack of a 'gap' to work at combined with the apparent low standard of competence measured. The lack of a gap between self and other ratings may not be a factor in those who had high self *and* other ratings in category (1): Atwater and Brett (2006) found that these participants were generally motivated to improve despite there being no discrepancy between competency assessments. However, in both categories (1) and (2) above, 'self-awareness' (which correlates with the term 'in agreement') can be considered good (McDowall, 2008) and may be itself a motivational factor.

Despite the findings of Bass and Yammarino in 1991, that over-raters (category 4 above) tend to be resistant to receiving critical feedback, over-raters seem to show the highest

levels of improvement following 360 degree feedback (Atwater *et al*, 1998), where rating gaps are clearly identified.

Under-raters may lack confidence. For under-raters some additional narrative comments on the feedback report provide additional contextual clues for their development, especially when supported through coaching, although it appears from a study by Atwater and Brett (2006) that collecting narrative feedback comments in addition to rating scale scores is a diminishing practice amongst organisations.

The two main assumptions that have developed from these studies are that 360 degree feedback is an effective feedback method because:

1. Seeing ourselves how others see us raises our level of self awareness, and
2. Self awareness is important for improvement.

But Mabey (2001) did not find this in a study of Open University managers. DeNisi and Kluger (2000:130) found that 38% of the effects of 360 degree were negative (demotivating). Atwater *et al* (2002) found that only 50% of managers in their study were able to identify improvements in performance following 360 degree feedback. It may therefore be that 360 degree feedback does not necessarily increase or corroborate self-awareness just because it provides ratings from different sources. Nor does it necessarily follow that self-awareness is a stimulus for further improvement. To add to the lack of agreement on the issue, even though a good deal of research in the past has tested the assumption that introducing 360 degree feedback increases people's self awareness (Fletcher and Baldry, 2001), Morgan *et al*, (2005) found no evidence of this occurring.

Another assumption for 360 degree feedback being more effective than single-rater assessments is that people who over-rate themselves for some of the competencies in their assessments will be motivated to improve by *negative feedback* (where their self assessment is higher than those of others). This is a complex area: comparatively higher self-ratings may be due to inaccuracy on the part of others. Or they may be due to a different perspective of the role by the role holder. Or they may be due to a false sense of ability. Whatever the reason for discrepancy, the 360 degree report profiles highlight the apparent gap and provide a focus of attention for the participant to consider (Fletcher and Baldry, 2001).

360 degree feedback should reduce the 'leniency bias' problem. Even though it was stated above that self-ratings in appraisals have been shown to be lenient (self-ratings are high), leniency ought to be less of a factor in 360 degree feedback than in other forms of self-assessment because, in practice, people in 360 degree events know full well that they will be receiving ratings from others, which should make their self-ratings more 'reliable' (by reducing the 'social desirability' effect, which is the tendency to over-rate oneself) and to be more self-critical or cautious. This does not mean that ratings will agree, just that self-ratings will be thought about more carefully and honestly. For example, Nilsen and Campbell (1993) saw that self-ratings were well correlated with others' ratings when people knew that they would be rated by others.

### **The effect of different rating sources**

In the discussions thus far, others' ratings have been mostly considered as a whole. In practice they generally consist of different categories of rater. Many studies, such as Fletcher and Baldry (2001) and Conway and Huffcott (1997), have focused on the quantitative inter-correlations amongst feedback sources, but better measures of validity come from examining 360 degree feedback's associations with other measures of job performance, such as interviews or assessment centre results (Scullen *et al*, 2003). Those relatively few studies which have examined correlations between 360 degree feedback and independent performance measures are inconsistent. For example, McEvoy and Beatty (1989) suggested that average subordinate ratings are generally the more reliable assessments of a manager's behaviour and have good predictive validity. But Darr and Catano (2008) found that only peer and supervisor ratings predicted performance in an external competency measure (an interview). And in any case, Moses *et al* (1993) proposed that raters will not necessarily give reliable or accurate ratings and also that the questionnaire design may not be up to the job of collecting reliable information.

It may be that variance in ratings is due to different interpretation of performance by individuals both within *and between* rater sources. That is, by people not rating the same constructs, mentioned earlier as a suggestion by Hannum (2007). This casts doubt on the value of conclusions based on correlations of self, boss, subordinate and peer ratings, despite the examination of such correlations having been a recurring feature of academic and commercial research into 360 degree feedback. If an individual's development plans

are based on the interpretation of erroneous or spurious ratings, the wrong kind of development may be the result (Hannum, 2007). However, according to early work by Campbell (1990), ratings are more likely to be explained by the performance of the ratee than be contaminated by bias (or instrument bias). According to this line of argument, when ratings do correlate either between rater sources or within rater categories, it can be taken to mean that they do measure something in common (van Dam, in Pearn, 2002:135).

This uncertainty about the meaning of rater agreement (or difference) may be one of the risks of taking a purely quantitative view of the 360 degree feedback results. In such cases, if there is poor 360 degree instrument and process design, it can exacerbate participants' negative attitudes towards the process. If rater scores are perceived as unreliable by participants, the credibility of the process is damaged. Training in the basic task of providing feedback is important for making scores as reliable as possible but is not always given (Kanouse, 1998; Bailey and Fletcher, 2002; Silverman *et al*, 2005), the assumption being that the feedback instrument will draw out reliable data from raters. But Fletcher *et al* (1998) and Fletcher and Baldry (1999) warned that the psychometric properties of many 360 degree questionnaires lacked design rigour.

But why should all 'other' raters agree? They can observe characteristics of participants from different perspectives and because of this it is useful for the people being assessed to see their 360 degree feedback in its context, which may vary because of the working relationship or the work environment. The source of the feedback can therefore be an important consideration as people evaluate their 360 degree feedback data. Brett and Atwater (2001) assessed participants' reactions to 360 degree feedback from various sources. Negative feedback from peers and bosses generated negative reactions (anger or criticism) but this tended not to happen when the negative feedback came from direct reports. Feedback from bosses and peers was seen to be more significant to the 360 degree participants.

### **The advantages of using 360 degree feedback**

Notwithstanding the technical difficulties of establishing the reliability and validity of 360 degree feedback instruments, many benefits of organisational use of 360 degree feedback have been cited in the literature, including the suggestion that participation of subordinates in the 360 degree process enhances feelings of staff engagement (Kaplan, 1993; Walton,

1992). There is a considerable body of literature about the perceived benefits of 360 degree feedback (Handy *et al*, 1996; Brutus, 1999) and also some which suggests that if there are any improvements needed they would mostly be concerned with attending to the psychometric properties (described above) of the instruments used (Fletcher and Baldry, 2001). Atwater and Brett (2006) have examined 360 degree feedback reaction as a measure of employee engagement, an assumption being that improved leadership as a result of the 360 degree feedback experience goes on to improve employee attitudes. Studies have demonstrated that 360 degree feedback can enhance two-way communication within organisations (London and Beatty, 1993; Garavan *et al*, 1997; Bernadin, 1986). London and Beatty (1993) argued that 360 degree feedback can build effective work relations and convey respect for employee opinion.

The supportive research has often been concentrated on the properties of the assessment (ratings, congruence between self-ratings and ratings from others, and so forth). But in parallel with this supportive research there have been comments about the lack of evidence of the real impact of 360 degree feedback in terms of the behavioural change and performance improvement it is intended to bring about. Maurer *et al* (2002) could see few relationships between feedback ratings and subsequent improvement in behaviour or attitudes. Empirical studies on the benefits of 360 degree feedback have been slower to develop. According to Toolan (1998) many empirical studies at the time were uncritical and often written from the organisational perspective. Even Fletcher and Baldry, whose research has been based on Occupational Psychology methodology, in their studies of 360 degree feedback have said that “*the actual amount of empirical evidence on the impact of 360 degree feedback is disappointingly small considering the extent of its use.*” (Fletcher and Baldry, 1999:163).

### **Barriers to effective 360 degree feedback implementation**

Despite the perceived benefits of 360 degree feedback there are some known obstacles to its effective implementation, such as employee acceptance, integration with other HR processes, and the lack of consultation before introducing it (Alimo-Metcalfe, 2003; Brutus *et al*, 2006).

Employees may feel especially threatened by the 360 degree mode of assessment (London *et al*, 1990). In the early days of its introduction this was possibly a more common obstacle, as organisations moved away from traditionally bureaucratic and hierarchical management styles (Murphy and Cleveland, 1991) which were nevertheless familiar territory to employees.

Silverman *et al* (2005) found that in many instances there is scant evidence that 360 degree feedback produces performance changes and they cite reasons such as poor resources for providing the development and a lack of motivation on the part of employees when they see little point in engaging in development activities. They found that there was a focus on the part of employers (and 360 degree feedback providers) on process rather than on outcomes, so that implementation is considered by looking at the instrument and does not include enough thinking about the supporting environment for development.

One opportunity for linking 360 degree feedback to organisational and Human Resource Management systems is by using it to inform the performance review (appraisal) process. As we see in the following section, this linkage needs to be treated with caution.

### **The effect of linking 360 degree feedback to appraisals**

Performance appraisals of the traditional type come under criticism partly because a person's supervisor does not necessarily provide high quality feedback (Bracken, 1996). 360 degree feedback supplements this information with the views of the target manager's other work colleagues. Other advantages as cited by Nowack (1993) are:

- increasing availability
- reduced costs of using the method (especially as an alternative to assessment centres), and
- the growing need for job-specific feedback for employees either plateauing in their careers or facing challenging changes in their work.

Whilst it appears to be a good idea to add 360 degree methods to performance appraisal as a useful source of performance data it has been shown that inclusion becomes an obstacle to effective use of 360 degree feedback. Much of the use of 360 degree feedback has been

for management development but there has been a trend (mainly in N. America rather than the U.K.) to incorporate it into the appraisal system (Maylett, 2009). One reason for its inclusion within appraisal is the assumption that multiple ratings will iron out bias in competency ratings (Latham *et al*, 2005)

An early study in Gulf Oil Company, in 1980, provides an example of one of the first attempts to improve upon performance appraisal by eliciting feedback from people other than an appraisee's manager. Gulf Oil Company executives in Europe expressed three main concerns with their appraisal system of the time: heavy reliance on line management, managers' dislike of sitting in judgment on employees and the danger of bias (Stinson and Stokes, 1980). Gulf went on to try out a rudimentary form of 360 degree feedback as an addition to the appraisal process and (self and other) ratings were reviewed by the employee's boss prior to completion of an appraisal form. The conclusion reached was that feedback was now more specific and less prone to bias and the process found a high degree of acceptance by all participants. One aspect to emerge, which is still of concern in today's 360 degree processes, was that the process could be threatening for some raters, despite a guarantee of anonymity.

Suspicion is aroused amongst employees when there is a link between the 360 degree feedback and pay. According to Pollack and Pollack (1996) research and practice both overwhelmingly indicated that the data collection and feedback processes are most effective and efficient when performance ratings are collected for developmental rather than evaluation (e.g., to determine pay or promotions) purposes. Since Pollack and Pollack's findings there has been little change in employee reaction to the use of 360 degree feedback in this way according to Silverman (2005). As Maylett (2009) suggests: *When 360 degree feedback has administrative consequences, such as raises, promotions, bonuses or possible layoffs, employees may be more likely to attack the feedback rather than accept it.... They may have much more to lose.* It is likely also that raters may give less candid feedback for similar reasons. Fletcher (2001) found that linking the outcomes of appraisal in general directly to remuneration does little for either the quality of the interaction that takes place in the appraisal discussion or the likelihood of effective outcomes occurring. It is therefore important to know the impact of linking 360 degree feedback with remuneration. The advice given by commercial and educational institutions which specialise in management development is not to use 360 degree feedback for appraisals (DeVries, 2007; Maylett, 2009).

In 1999 Warr and Ainsworth (1999) reported that 50% of the organisations they studied used 360 degree feedback as part of appraisal but only 7% used it for determining pay. Many researchers support the view that collection of 360 degree data and subsequent feedback are more likely to be effective when used for developmental purposes (Pierpel, 2001; Silverman *et al*, 2005; Chivers and Darling, 2001).

Ownership of the data may also affect attitudes towards 360 degree feedback. Studies have shown that raters may respond differently to giving ratings, depending on whether they do so anonymously or not (Kettleby, 1997). Anonymity reassures raters that they can comment with no fear of retribution and in fact this has shown up in early studies in the form of strong 'horn' (critical feedback) effect (Meyer 1980), where people have rated their boss more critically when anonymity was guaranteed.

Knowing who has said what can help participants in their sense-making of the information. This was the conclusion from a study of 360 degree feedback in the Patent Office (Morgan and Cannan, 2005). It may also be important for theoretical reasons: as discussed above in connection with the work of Hannum (2007), that there is a question mark over whether different raters are measuring the same constructs.

If it is used for appraisal, the overall 360 degree data is owned by the HR department or the manager of the ratee. This is different to the situation where 360 degree feedback is used for development only. It is likely that a more productive learning environment is created when the confidentiality of the data is maintained (McCarthy and Garavan, 2007) so that mixing up the purpose for 360 degree feedback (originally intended, as described above, as a way of encouraging performance improvement) with appraisal and pay is likely to get poor outcomes from each application. Despite the evidence, many North American employers use 360 degree feedback for administrative purposes (McDowall and Kurz, 2008; McDowell and Mabey, 2008).

According to Silverman (2005), research had not demonstrated whether attaching 360 degree feedback to appraisal is a '*good or a bad thing*', but that it is reasonable to infer that to try and achieve both purposes with just 360 degree feedback can be problematic.

## **Current views about 360 degree feedback**

An interesting phenomenon is the way in which 360 degree feedback has grown in popularity in the last two decades when the evidence has been mostly for the rigour of the application's instrument rather than through evaluation of its impact on people and organisations. Brunssen and Olsen (1997) state that “ *The ‘solutions’ to organisational problems are often found because they resonate with senior management values and convictions and free the reformers from the need to find the most appropriate remedy, leading to imitation rather than innovations*”. In its early days of implementation, 360 degree feedback was regarded as a fad, but some elements of Brunssen and Olsen's statement may well explain its continued popularity.

Longitudinal studies over several years and over repeated use of 360 degree feedback, such as that by London and Smither (2002), have pointed to factors other than rater effect, instrument design, and purpose, being implicated. London and Smither built upon their earlier study (London and Smither, 1995) which suggested that events and conditions following the feedback were significant in bringing about change in behaviour. Their 2005 study concluded that “*Specifically, improvement is most likely to occur when feedback indicates that change is necessary, recipients have a positive feedback orientation, perceive a need to change their behaviour, react positively to the feedback, believe change is feasible, set appropriate goals to regulate their behaviour, and take actions that lead to skill and performance improvement.*”

Recent studies suggest that the best outcomes from 360 degree feedback occur when its focus is on individual development in job-related attributes and when it is facilitated by effective feedback-giving practice (McDowall and Kurtz, 2008). In their quantitative study of over 1000 participating managers in a 360 degree feedback and coaching exercise, London and Smither (1995) found that those who went through coaching adjusted better to the performance change requirements that were identified.

Recent literature has been more critical of the use of 360 degree feedback to achieve performance improvement and behavioural change. Nikolaou *et al* (2006) show that organisations frequently assume that 360 degree feedback combined with leadership development activity automatically leads to improvement in leadership skills. They suggest

that whilst 360 degree feedback has the potential to bring about change it may also overwhelm people with information.

Managers may also feel resistant towards 360 degree feedback. Smither *et al* (2005) found that managers differentiated into two broad groupings, one more resistant to accepting and using feedback than others. They concluded that an organisation should not expect across the board performance improvement simply by introducing (well-designed and managed) 360 degree feedback. This suggestion that feedback disposition should also be considered is important.

Acceptance of the feedback is important if there is to be any serious intent to improve performance (DeNisi and Kluger, 2000). It is therefore useful to know how to increase acceptance levels when introducing or repeating 360 degree feedback interventions. The theoretical basis of this acceptance would also be valuable to know, certainly for 360 feedback and perhaps also for performance improvement programmes generally.

Acceptance of feedback in a leadership development context was studied by McCarthy and Garavan (2007), who found that procedural justice was a significant factor. In that study, the main procedural justice factor appears to be that all those involved in giving and receiving feedback must trust that all ratings from people will remain anonymous. They also found that managers' cynicism (perhaps not surprisingly) affected their reaction.

## **2.7 How do organisations evaluate their 360 degree programmes**

In a large-scale study, Warr and Ainsworth (1999) reported that organisations which had implemented 360 degree feedback frequently reported that it had been successful. But on the other hand, only a year earlier, Toolan (1998) had suggested that empirical studies at the time were generally uncritical. And this was echoed by Fletcher and Baldry (1999) a short time later. Clearly, the organisational reviews are suggesting success but there is little independent research to support this view. It is therefore useful to look at the way in which internal evaluations are carried out.

Organisations operate their own internal methods of evaluation. Their methods are aimed at measuring the success of their programmes. As mentioned above, the bulk of independent research to date has been centred on the psychometric properties of 360 degree feedback instruments, rather than the 'success' of programmes and the first major

longitudinal study of the outcomes (expressed as performance levels) of the process was not published until 1999 (Walker and Smither, 1999), and this was limited to 'upward appraisal' only.

But how is 'effectiveness' or 'success' defined by organisations that use 360 degree feedback? One framework which is used by HR and OD practitioners to evaluate the effectiveness of training interventions, and which is also used to consider the impact of 360 degree feedback ( Smith and Walker, 2001; Edwards and Ewen, 2000), is through Kirkpatrick's four criteria: Reactions, Learning, Behaviour, and Organisational Results (Kirkpatrick, 1983), which was devised for evaluating corporate training programmes. The descriptions of each level are:

1. 'reaction' of participant - what they thought and felt
2. 'Learning' - the resulting increase in knowledge or capability
3. 'behaviour' - extent of behaviour and capability improvement and implementation/application
4. 'Results' - the effects on the business or environment resulting from the participant's performance

Although this review procedure is used as a guide by many organisations to assess the benefits of 360 degree feedback, the evaluation is unlikely to go beyond an assessment of how well the instrument works and to provide a measure of the extent of development planning (Smither and Walker, 2001). What Kirkpatrick's model cannot do is give a reliable measure of how positively the whole experience of 360 degree feedback is perceived (Atwater *et al*, 2007): the 'reaction' level assessment is a snapshot, carried out immediately after the event. In this sense it may be missing some significant aspects of feedback culture that could be useful in improving the whole feedback system yet further.

Evaluation at level 3 of the Kirkpatrick model (resultant behavioural change) is often used as the most significant measure of success of 360 degree feedback (Fletcher and Baldry, 1999; Kluger and DeNisi, 2002). There can be problems with this. The popular assumption is that if you measure one of a person's managerial competencies through 360 degree feedback at a point in time (time 1) and compare that rating with feedback collected in the same way at a later date (time 2, maybe 6 or 12 months later), then if the score goes up it must mean that the person's performance in that competency has improved. Likewise, if

the score had gone down then the person's performance had declined. But many studies have shown that performance ratings generally become more positive over time (Fletcher, 2001). This may not necessarily be because of performance improvement so the reason for this trend must come from other sources. The re-measuring approach does in fact contain several known potential problems. The main ones are '*response shift bias*', a second is '*regression to the mean*' and a third is '*ceiling effect*'.

*Response shift bias* is an effect of changes in treatment of people's standards of measurement (Treborg *et al*, 1980). It applies mostly to the self assessment aspect of 360 degree reporting but the same phenomenon is likely to apply to 'others' ratings (Smither and Walker, 2002). The difficulty arises when the 360 degree intervention itself changes the subject's evaluation standard for the dimension being measured. Someone may measure him or herself on a dimension and give a high rating. But once having had constructive and detailed feedback (through coach or line manager intervention) the understanding of what that dimension really means may deepen. It could be that this deeper understanding will make the person more aware of shortcomings in that dimension. The next 360 degree feedback will then show a lower rating. So in this example, even though a manager will set an improvement goal and actually improve as a result of the feedback, the next round of 360 degree feedback will record an apparent decline.

One way of tackling this problem in evaluation of 360 degree success at level 3 (behaviour) is to ask people to rate only the degree of change that has occurred since the first 360 degree feedback intervention. This should mean that the person will now re-evaluate their first rating in the light of their better appreciation of the dimension's definition and apply a change rating accordingly.

*Regression to the mean* is an effect of random variance between time 1 and time 2 (Howell, 1997: p. 271). For example, if you give a class of students a separate multiple-choice test on two successive days, the worst performers on the first day will tend to improve their scores on the second day, and the best performers on the first day will tend to do worse on the second day. The phenomenon occurs because each sample is affected by random variance. Student scores are determined in part by underlying ability and in part by chance. If this regression is not taken into account, changes in a group's average test score over time may be misinterpreted as changes in the group's average ability rather than natural and expected fluctuations in scores about ability (Smith and Smith, 2005).

The less reliable a measure is, the more regression to the mean will occur (Smither and Walker, 2001). Since 360 degree feedback is known for not being extremely reliable, scores are prone to regression to the mean.

The third potential problem with 360 degree evaluation of behavioural change may mask real improvement and this is the *ceiling effect* (Gravetter and Forzano, 2008: p. 93). Any rating based on a scale, say from 1 to 5 can show this effect if people score at the high end when they are first assessed. Subsequent ratings on that dimension may not show an improvement simply because there is little 'room' on the existing scale to show improvement (Smith and Smith, 2005). In the same way, people who score initially in the middle to low regions can show a marked improvement the next time they are rated, simply because there is scope for showing it on the rating scale. The retrospective assessment of change mentioned in connection with the response shift bias problem is one way around this obstacle to accuracy.

These three types of uncertainty make the evaluation of the success of 360 degree feedback through the measurement of subsequent improvements in behaviour dimensions an unreliable process.

Those evaluation studies of 360 degree feedback that have taken measures to avoid the uncertainty errors above have discovered effects that may have a bearing on the research question of this thesis. One such work carried out in a single firm (Johnson and Ferstl, 1999) found that managers who overrated themselves (compared with others' ratings) tended to improve their performance as a result of the feedback whilst under-raters' performance declined. As suggested earlier in this Chapter, these trends suggest that people who have a clear improvement target will commit to improving their performance. But as we have also seen in earlier sections, this can be a simplification of the real picture, since there are factors such as the nature of the feedback and the feasibility of any required improvement. There are a range of antecedents that affect reaction to 360 degree feedback.

Any model that tries to explain reactions to 360 degree feedback must therefore address context and environment as well as the nature of the feedback. Case-study research by Silverman *et al* (2005) implies that in any 360 degree feedback system there are likely to be factors other than just the feedback itself which have the ability to influence the extent

to which participants involve themselves in development. According to Silverman's findings these additional factors include:

- how people react to getting performance feedback (disposition to feedback),
- organisational culture and its effect on whether performance feedback is common currency in a particular work setting, and
- how fair on people the workplace environment is perceived to be.

## **2.8 Summary of the research literature review**

There are many combinations of factors to consider when trying to predict an individual's reaction to 360 degree feedback. The review of the literature has suggested that some of the contributory factors are from:

- the organisation he or she works in
- the nature of the individual's own personality and attributes,
- the process itself, including the behavioural dimensions being measured, and
- differences in performance levels that are perceived by people from the different 'angles' of the 360 degree assessment, and
- cultural factors that determine the environment in which the 360 degree feedback is experienced.

Psychometric properties of different 360 degree feedback instruments have shown that the measurement quality of the instrument used (its validity and reliability) are important factors to consider when designing the process and subsequent development plans. Further studies of the relative scores from different sources and the correlations between them have suggested that rating averages can differ and that the psychometric properties of the instrument can affect how much of this difference is actually 'real'; that is, down to reliable reflections on performance by raters. There has been less research into the way participants may react to these differences in their feedback in terms of attitudes towards the process itself.

It seems that 360 degree feedback has become popular despite it not being a particularly accurate or reliable measure of performance. The reasons for this may be that its growth in popularity has been through it being an additional feature of other programmes or systems,

such as appraisals and leadership programmes. It seems now to have settled into a niche of HR practice, where the outcomes of the process are not formal or administrative but more practical than with its earlier incarnations. But the cultural factors need also to be considered. Farrell (in IRS, 2000, p.5) notes “*360 degree feedback will struggle in any organisation that has a low level of openness and trust*”. The corollary of this was suggested by Chivers and Darling (1999) when they suggested that the introduction of 360 degree feedback can contribute to opening up the organisational culture. An interesting conclusion for Mabey (2001, p.51) was that 360 degree feedback, when linked with management development, leads to more favourable assessments of the organisation as a whole. In that study, participants were less happy when their managers were not involved in the feedback discussions. Maurer *et al* (2006) found that the most important predictors of involvement in development following 360 degree feedback were:

- The working environment
- A belief in the capability to improve skills

The literature has suggested some ‘negative antecedents’. That is, some factors that hinder or undermine the success of 360 degree programmes. These are such factors as ‘resistance’, ‘lack of trust’, ‘cynicism’, ‘anger’ and ‘threat’. And the most cited positive antecedents have been ‘trust’ and ‘facilitation with boss or coach’. There are currently separate theoretical frameworks that can accommodate these factors, such as Organisational Justice (see Chapter Five), but no empirical studies seem to develop an integrating framework that could explain reactions to 360 degree feedback through the interaction of these factors.

## **2.9 Next steps**

Following this review of the research literature I have found no single area of research that fully addresses my own research question, which asks what it is that makes the difference between participants’ 360 degree feedback experiences regarded as being good compared with those that are not.

In general, there is an imbalance between the quantitative and the qualitative research activity: the empirical research has tended to be quantitative, and, relating to my own research question, there is a lack of qualitative research exploring people’s reactions or the factors that may cause these reactions.

The methods I adopt for this qualitative study and the rationale for, and implications of, using them are discussed in Chapter 3 below.

*It is reasonable to observe the world about one and report what one sees....Also, the first step in the scientific method is to observe and report one's observations.*

*Psychological interpretations, motivations and intents are rather more dangerous.*

Peter Pauling, Biography of James Watson

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter summarises the methodological consideration of the research question. It justifies the epistemological and ontological bases for the research design. The methods used are also described, and the rationale for selecting these particular methods is also given. Before the detailed rationale, the following section gives an overview of the methods used.

#### **Synopsis of the selected methods**

The aim of adopting the methods described here was to collect data in terms of people's descriptions of 360 degree feedback experiences, expressed in their own descriptive language as participants in the process.

The research question is about differences in participant perceptions of the 360 degree feedback process. To address this question, participants' perceptions (personal evaluations of the experience) were explored through interviews. The research question would then be informed by identifying and understanding the factors that affect these perceptions.

Of particular interest to this study are therefore the perceptions, attitudes and subsequent behaviour that result from the participant's experiences of 360 degree feedback. Behaviour has been shown to stem from perceptions and attitudes and also the context of the perceived experience (Fazio, 1986:243; Fazio, Powell and Herr, 1983). Investigations of participant perceptions and their descriptions of their experiences and intentions to improve performance or engage with the organisational purpose for 360 degree development were the focus of the data collection for the current study. Qualitative research methods were used to explore the perceptions of 360 degree feedback of participants and to also explore to what extent these influenced the development of

attitudes not only towards 360 degree feedback, but also towards the subsequent training and development activity.

Individual interviews were used to collect raw data. The method adopted was the ‘critical incident interview’ (Flanagan, 1954) in order to elicit recollections about previous sequences of events comprising overall experiences of 360 degree feedback programmes. This episodic elicitation has the following advantages (Kim *et al*, 2003:358; Singh and Wilkes, 1996:355):

1. It is theoretically valid since feelings about experiences are episode-specific,
2. It is empirically sound as it facilitates memory recall by asking participants about salient events that caused these feelings, and
3. Pragmatic, in that it provides reference points for coding decisions.

A possible disadvantage of the critical incident methodology is that because it elicits recollections (that is, retrospective responses) it can be prone to bias from memory lapse or inconsistency of responses for example (Singh and Wilkes, 1996:355). As is described later in this chapter the interventions of the interviewer can reduce this bias.

The interview subjects were managers within employing organisations who had had experience of being participants in 360 degree feedback programmes. They were all middle-managers (heads of department or function). Demographic data on seniority (level of management), management function, previous career, gender, and time with the business were also collected. As the study progressed the decision was taken not to use these data because the findings that emerged suggested the influence of factors that rendered these subdivisions unnecessary for an initial explanation of how perceptions of 360 degree feedback arise. (This is discussed in the fieldwork section of this chapter and also in the conclusions chapter where suggestions for further research are made). No *a priori* hypothesis was assumed for this study. The empirical data were analysed and interpreted in order to detect themes from which theory could be developed that would explain the data.

Grounded theory (developed by Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used to analyse emergent themes from the interviews. One of the principles of grounded theory is that emergent theory is tested and developed from the start of the research process itself (Banister *et al*, 1994). The research design for the present study has taken a number of ‘heuristic case-studies’ (Gomm *et al* 2002:137) as a framework for collecting the interview data through

interviews. Within-case and between-case analyses were then carried out to explore the research question in the light of the findings. The within-case analysis used grounded theory to establish the themes that characterise each case. To assist with the between-case analysis, visual maps were used to support the comparisons of cases.

The research design was guided by a case study strategy. The research design is intended to provide the logical sequence that connects the initial research question and the set of conclusions about that question. A case study approach that took within and between case study comparisons of coded interview data was seen as providing the framework for that sequence.. The unit of analysis for this study was an organisation employing a group of individual participants. There were 9 such organisations. Each case contained different numbers of participants and the implications of this for drawing conclusions, and the sampling techniques used, are described in detail in this chapter.

As described above, interviewing was used as the method of data collection. Members of each case were managers in organisations who had been through 360 degree feedback as participants. They were interviewed and grounded theory was used to code and analyse the transcripts of participant descriptions and stories, as a within-case analysis. Between-case comparisons were used as a second stage of analysis.

## **Overview of the combination of methods**

### **Ethnography**

The principles of ethnography underpinned the data collection, analysis and interpretation phases of the study. “*Ethnography is concerned with experience as it is lived, felt or undergone*” (Banister *et al*, 1994:34) and to research these experiences the researcher must somehow participate in a relevant (to the research) aspect of the life of those being studied. The current study explores perceptions, which are participant evaluations of their experiences. For this study two enquiry perspectives were identified: one was by, as a practitioner and ex-participant, being already immersed in the phenomenon at the heart of the question, which is the 360 degree feedback process and the way in which performance feedback is given and received in organisations. The other was by using a particular interview technique, the critical incident technique, described in detail later in this chapter.

As Hammersley and Atkinson (2001:123) point out “*the role of the researcher in generating the data being collected must be recognised*”, and this is an important ethnographic perspective. A researcher who is familiar through practice with the topic being studied, or, as with the present study, also familiar as a practitioner with the organisations where the participants worked, can acknowledge and exploit this familiarity, rather than try to be a ‘fly on the wall’ researcher. The researcher can adopt more of an active participant role and in the interview setting this takes the form of building rapport through mutual experience and understanding of what experiencing the 360 degree feedback process can feel like. Also, exploring and probing answers from prior knowledge or familiarity with a theme or problem associated with 360 feedback can provide opportunities to collect additional pertinent data. Acknowledging that the researcher can influence the context is an important feature of ethnography.

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:18) suggest, “...*the fact that as researchers we are likely to have an effect on the people we study does not mean that the validity of our data is restricted to the data elicitation situations on which we relied.*” They go on to suggest that reactivity can be exploited too, by making efforts to understand the effects of the researcher: “*the image of the researcher is brought into parallel with that of the people studied, as actively making sense of the world, without undermining the commitment of research to realism.*”(Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:19). Ethnography is regarded here as being a more suitable methodology for this research question than phenomenology, where the emphasis is on the researcher’s ‘epoché’ (Hollway *et al*, 2007:44). This runs counter to the ethnographic approach described above, of allowing the researcher’s appreciation of the culture being studied.

### **Critical Incident Interview**

The critical incident method originally devised by Flanagan (1954) is a semi-structured interview that asks people to describe in detail their feelings and thoughts about a significant event. In this case the ‘event’ was their experience of a 360 degree feedback process from start to finish. The interview begins with defining a timeline to set the boundaries of the event and questions are used to probe the salient experiences being described by the interviewee. The term ‘semi-structured’ is used to suggest that there are some common features contained in each interview (the timeline, the use of events as the foci of discussion, the types of, rather than actual, questions that are used). The interview

setting was the participant's workplace, whether or not the interview was face to face or by telephone.

Thus, in this study, the critical incident interview was the method used to collect the data, which were people's descriptions of their subjective experience. As Silverman (2001:91) suggests: '*the primary issue (of the non-positivist interview) is to generate data which give an authentic insight into people's experiences*'. The detail of people's own descriptions of their experience of 360 degree feedback was captured in this way and was an alternative to direct participant observation, another method often used in ethnography. Apart from problems with access and the time required, data about people's thoughts and feelings about an extended experience would not be easily collected using only observation. Hammersley, (1995:141) suggests that "*the differences between participant observation and interviewing are not as great as is sometimes suggested*", on the grounds that the purpose of either method is often to generate 'insider accounts': by listening to, and questioning, the subjective descriptions of participants.

Critical incident interview was the selected method because it is appropriate for collecting data from interviewees' recollections of an extended process that contained specific events. Experience of specific events within linear sequences of events were what they were being asked to describe. This 'episodic elicitation' as described by Singh and Wilkes (1996), allows data to be collected that is related to a specific and salient event. It is empirically sound because it focuses on the salient, which facilitates recall of the event. There can be disadvantages to this method (such as memory lapse or inconsistent responses) due to the retrospective nature of the interview. However, as remarked above, the active interventions of the interviewer are important, such as the probing and checking for consistency to discourage memory bias.

Structured interviews were also considered as a method. They were considered to be unsuitable on ethnographic grounds in that any preconceived structure suggests a hypothesis being tested (the critical incident interview allows the interviewee to recollect their experiences in directions that they see fit. The role of the interviewer is to question to understand that direction and to control it when required). The aim was to gather raw data with no preconceived view about what hypothesis the data may or may not support. The same argument applies to survey methods of data collection which were also discarded as methods for this enquiry.

Personal construct interview methods were also considered as a means of eliciting people's felt experiences but were not used, although as a fruitful means of further investigation into reactions to 360 degree feedback they are mentioned in the conclusions chapter. Personal construct theory is a form of phenomenology (Butt, 2005), but to focus on how things appear differently to different people, personal construct interviews, such as the repertory grid interview (Kelly, 1954), require people to undertake analysis of their views in order to articulate their personal feelings about a phenomenon or person. The purpose of the present study was to collect descriptions of experience, in ways generated for the most part by the interviewee as fluent descriptions of what they recall of their perceptions at the time. These rich descriptions would be used as the starting point of the analysis, to be carried out by the researcher.

Group discussions were also discarded as possible data collection methods because interaction between participants can prevent exploration and understanding of personal experiences, the method being more suited to discursive psychological approaches (Horton-Salway, 2008:30).

### **Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory is a data analysis method used as a means of generating theory. It rejects the suggestion that the study of '*a given phenomenon needs to be rooted initially in the theoretical literature, and that existing theory should indicate which methods are most appropriate*' (Giles, 2001:165). Instead theory is said to be 'grounded' in the data itself. Preconceived notions are unnecessary. Once a gap in the existing literature is identified, that gap can be explored even without a hypothesis to test. The data used with grounded theory are verbal accounts of people's experiences. The data are then subjected to a continuous process of coding and categorising, starting with a large set of descriptive codes and gradually reducing to a series of analytic categories. The aim of grounded theory is to generate a set of theoretical concepts that best explains the data. The sampling characteristics of grounded theory are discussed further later in this chapter.

Grounded theory has its origins in symbolic interactionism, a paradigm which holds that people act toward things based on the meaning they have for them; and these meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation (Blumer, 1969). Much of the work evolving from this paradigm was also emerging at a time when qualitative research was under attack for lacking "scientific" procedures and rigour (Hollway *et al*,

2008:11). Consequently there was recognition of the need for a methodology that could track and validate the process of theory building (Goulding, 2005:294). Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory method has become a popular method because of this.

Critics of grounded theory suggest that it can fail to acknowledge implicit theories which guide work at an early stage, that is *'used unintelligently it can also degenerate into a fairly empty building of categories'* (Silverman, 2001:47), or also *'degenerate into a mere smokescreen to legitimise purely empiricist research'* (Bryman, 1988: 83-87). Having the researcher combine the grounded theory approach with an ethnographic self awareness is a way of reducing these risks.

### **Case Studies**

Although no prior hypothesis had been made, the research question of this thesis was likely to be addressed by examining the context in which the 360 degree feedback process operates (as discussed in chapter 1 above). Yin (2003) has suggested several applications of the case study method, in particular stating *"you would use the case study method because you deliberately wanted to uncover contextual conditions – believing that they might be highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study"* (page 13). The interview and grounded theory data collection and analysis methods complement this approach to research design – the case study organisations provided different contexts in which the 360 degree feedback operated, providing the possibility of seeing effects of these conditions..

*"The term 'case-study' can refer to several very different epistemological entities"* (Clyde Mitchell, 2002:168). Mitchell goes on to suggest that at its most basic it can refer to the descriptive material the observer has assembled by whatever means available about some particular phenomenon. In the present study, a case is a specific and distinct organisational setting (the 'employing organisation' of a group of participants in 360 degree feedback. There were nine such cases). From within each case it was possible to not only generate subjective data from participant interviews but also to have informal conversations with their colleagues, to see documentation of the organisation's corporate values and strategy, to understand the structures and processes of the organisation, to be given the historical backdrop (recent takeovers, major initiatives or changes, and so on) and, in some of the cases, to see the results of the organisation's staff attitude surveys. This collecting of data from several sources is also a feature of ethnographic research. In each of the cases described in this study the main focus of research attention is on the interview findings,

which comprise the experiences of individuals of 350 degree feedback. But in the findings chapter (chapter 4 below) each case is introduced with background information derived from these other data sources. This additional data is used to locate the findings from particular case studies in the context in which people have their experiences. These contextual similarities or differences can be used to further explore the patterns in the data.

The precise definition of ‘case study’ for this analysis is described by Eckstein (1975) and termed the ‘heuristic case study’, which is a case-study method deliberately chosen to develop theory where ‘*deliberately generalisable relations do not just turn up but are sought out*’ (Eckstein, 1975:104). With heuristic case studies an initial case is studied in order to arrive at a preliminary theoretical construct (or constructs), which is then regarded as a ‘*slim clue to a valid general model*’ (Eckstein, in Gomm *et al*, 2002:137). The addition of further cases is intended to suggest ways of amending and improving the constructs until the constructs reach the stage of being available to stand as a hypothetical model that warrants further testing by other methods. Because of this, the number of coded categories becomes less important than the descriptions and strength of feeling about them.

#### ***Combining ethnography with grounded theory within a case-study research strategy***

Ethnography is considered by many researchers to be compatible with grounded theory (Pettigrew, 2000:256). Both have been derived from the symbolic interactionist perspective described above. Ethnographic study can provide the ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973:9-10) which is useful data for grounded theory analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The data is generated from people who are describing their subjective experiences and the transcripts of the interview data are coded using the principles of grounded theory.

The analysis starts with individual descriptions of incidents and experiences and works towards more abstract conceptual categories to ‘*synthesize, explain and to understand your data to identify patterned relationships within it*’ (Charmaz, 2004). Using these approaches there is simultaneous involvement in data-collection and analysis.

As themes emerge from the interview data through grounded theory inspection and analysis, a set of constructs that apply to a single case is developed. The nine cases of the present study allow this process to be repeated and the list of themes compared and contrasted and associated where appropriate with differences or similarities between context variables of each case. A parsimonious theoretical framework can be developed

from this set of themes and variable Attempts to generalize across all cases can then be tested by applying the model retrospectively to the case-study findings. Because the sampling is not probabilistic and depends on the notion of ‘theoretical saturation’ of coded categories, generalising across case studies is considered using the reflexive analytical perspective of the researcher, not by counting the number of coded text passages.

These approaches will be described fully in the next two chapters of this thesis. The remainder of this chapter will discuss the methodological principles considered in the research design and will also describe in detail each of the methods as they were used in practice during this study. The chapter concludes with an outline of the fieldwork carried out, describing the main characteristics of each case and the numbers and types of interviews carried out.

### **3.2 Principles of the research strategy**

As Eisenhardt (1989:532) has suggested, development of theory is a central activity in organisational research, and Glaser and Strauss (1967:33) argue that there needs to be a clear connection between the theory and empirical ‘reality’, although there are many examples in the literature where the tie between a theory and the actual data is actually tenuous (Perrow, 1986; Pfeffer and Pollack, 1982). In this thesis I am using a combination of methods described above, which are:

- Critical Incident Interviews - to collect data from participants,
- Grounded Theory – to identify themes from the data,
- Cognitive Mapping – to help to visualise the data for sorting into possible themes and hierarchies, and
- Case-study research – to locate the interviews in their organisational contexts.

Using this combination of methods I endeavour to make clear the links between the data I collect and the descriptive model I go on to create. I took a pragmatic approach when selecting these methods, asking the question “which methods will provide the data to best address the research question?” Because of the nature of my enquiry, which is about people and their perceptions and attitudes, the research domain falls into an overlapping region of several academic fields of study. These fields include management studies (including leadership, Human Resource and organisational studies), sociology and established areas of psychology such as social psychology, occupational psychology, and organisational behaviour. Each of these disciplines has its own traditions of research and

some have historical areas of controversy and arguments about methodology (in some fields, notably within the psychological disciplines, these debates still continue, as I describe below). Occupational Psychology quantitative methodology has had a strong influence on related areas of management studies (Symon and Cassell, 2006) and quantitative methods have been extensively reported in the research literature of 360 degree feedback.

I describe my rationale in the following sections. One of my first considerations was how my own position as a researcher would be affected by my experience as a practitioner in the area I was studying.

Before describing the specific methods I have adopted I will discuss the development of my research perspective and the rationale for my selected approach.

### **3.3 Methodology - Enquiry into social and work psychology**

My research question originated partly from recognising an imbalance in the literature between the quantitative psychometric studies that particularly dominated 360 degree feedback research at the time, and the use of other more qualitative enquiries. This apparent distinction is also reflected generally in the debate around whether social research of any kind is best based on a positivist or on a phenomenological paradigm. This section provides an overview of the various philosophical standpoints represented by these paradigms as they have developed in social research generally, and then provides some background to the way in which these perspectives have affected the ways in which 360 degree feedback has been studied. Given this background, the rationale for my own research strategy is developed.

#### **Philosophies and Practices in Social Research**

A framework of the paradigms of research philosophies has been described by Burrell and Morgan (1979) who suggest a set of four continua, as shown in figure 4 below.

<b>Paradigm</b>		<b>Paradigm</b>
<b>Nominalism</b>	<b>ONTOLOGY</b>	<b>Realism</b>
Reality is made up of personal constructs		Reality exists external to the individual
<b>Phenomenological*</b>	<b>EPISTEMOLOGY</b>	<b>Positivism</b>
The researcher can occupy the same frame of reference as the participant. 'Observations and conceptual contents interpenetrate one another' (Howe, 2007)		Data collected by 'theory-neutral methods in order to eliminate the effect of the researcher/observer
<b>Voluntarism</b>	<b>HUMAN NATURE</b>	<b>Determinism</b>
People are agents of their own destinies and can exercise free will.		Social structures and situations determine individual action
<b>Idiographic</b>	<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>Nomothetic</b>
Qualitative analysis of subjective accounts and discourse for example and understanding from first hand knowledge		Hypothesis testing, quantitative (surveys, experiments)

\* The term 'Phenomenological' is selected here but other terms, such as naturalism or interpretivism are used by different authors (Lincoln and Guba, 1979; Howe, 2003; Hammersley, 1995) to describe a similar epistemological viewpoint.

**Figure 4 Methodological influences on social research (based on the model of Burrell and Morgan, 1979)**

Each of the four continua in Figure 4 has two opposing paradigms as 'poles'. A simplified summary of the contrasts of the Epistemology and Ontology paradigms is to look at those tending towards the Realist, Positivist pole as wanting to be 'fly on the wall' researchers and those at the Nominalist, Phenomenological end as being 'full participants' in their investigations. Another contrast would be to see the Phenomenological view as being 'value-bound' (acknowledging such influences as politics, subjectivity and power relations), and the Positivist stance as 'value-free' (concerned with seeking facts, rationality, and objectivity) (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Debates have arisen around these different paradigms. Those with more extreme views argue for an 'either-or' view, that the paradigms must stay at separate 'poles'. Those on the positivist side, such as Morgan (1998), are concerned about the subjectivity and lack of replicability of qualitative studies. On the other hand, some phenomenologist and

naturalistic researchers feel that positivists are not aware of the importance of the reflexivity of the researcher (Weber, 2004). Failure to acknowledge that the researcher is also conditioned by the environment in which he or she operates means that the 'theory-neutral' stance of the positivist model is impossible to achieve in this setting (Hollway *et al.*, 2007).

As Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest, the positivist stance on this apparent epistemological dualism is that: "*the inquirer and the object of inquiry are independent; the knower and the known constitute a discrete dualism*". On the other hand, the naturalistic version states: "*the inquirer and the 'object' of the inquiry interact to influence one another; knower and unknown are inseparable*". These two statements describe the essential difference between the two paradigms of the epistemology dualism.

This rhetoric has developed out of the debate between the purists of the opposing philosophies, but there are pragmatist researchers who are more likely to see these ontological and epistemological descriptions not as divisions, but as useful continua that can act as a guide to research design. Consideration of these standpoints in this way (as being at the ends of continua) is also a useful model for deciding on the use of qualitative versus quantitative methods for carrying out the research. Qualitative methods vary in nature and some, such as Grounded Theory and the data display methods of Miles and Huberman (1994), are seen to be so formalised as to resemble quantitative methods (Giles, 2002:162).

Pragmatic, mixed-method approaches are now more popular. Although the classic forms of positivism and phenomenology can appear to be incompatible, "*epistemological work has not stood still*" (Howe, 2003:3) and elements of these forms can be combined in a pragmatic way.

### **The methodological influences and debates concerning 360 degree feedback research**

As mentioned in Chapter Two, research into 360 degree feedback has been strongly influenced by the methods of Occupational Psychology. Research methodology in Occupational Psychology, and often in more general psychology (Banister *et al.*, 1994), has developed from a positivist philosophy in which, as suggested above, the assumption is that our interpretation of others' behaviour may lack reliability because of the influence of

our own attitudes and values. This positivism has become “*the orthodox epistemology of work-related psychology*” (Johnson and Cassell, 2001), where theories are confirmed or falsified by testing. The use of variables in experiments or the application of statistical analysis in Occupational Psychology research is an adaptation of the scientific method of the natural and physical sciences. The justification for this positivist approach is that to compare a theory with the observed facts you need to standardise procedures to remove the effect of the researcher. Replication can then be carried out by other researchers to test the reliability of the findings (Johnson and Cassell, 2001).

Because this philosophy and its associated methodology have become common practice in Occupational Psychology, a debate has developed within the discipline, partly because of what is regarded by some researchers as the reflexive nature of this field of research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) and partly because the quantitative methods are seen by critics as being taken from the natural sciences merely to improve the standing of Occupational Psychology as a ‘scientific’ discipline (Salmon, 2003).

To examine perceptions of 360 degree feedback through participants’ experiences I have adopted the pragmatic view that “*good researchers choose a research method that fits their purposes and get on with the business of doing their research*” (Weber, 2004). Indeed, Burrell and Morgan (1979), in developing the framework underlying figure 4, suggest that all four dimensions of research philosophy inform the different research paradigms through their interaction in various permutations. Using their descriptive framework as a guide, I designed my research strategy assuming it would be best done through the application of *social* research philosophy, with the focus of study being people’s behaviour and attitudes. It was helpful to use Burrell and Morgan’s model of social research of Figure 4 above and define each of the four elements of enquiry in terms of the assumptions about how my research question would be investigated. My assumptions are presented in figure 5 below.

- 1) ONTOLOGY: The methodology will assume that people rely heavily on personal constructs to describe the world. The methods need to capture these attempts at sense-making.
- 2) EPISTEMOLOGY: The assumption here is that knowledge about human behaviour can develop from understanding these constructs, and these form the basis of the analysis.
- 3) HUMAN NATURE: The assumption here will be that the methods acknowledge human agency in forming their views and attitudes towards the research question.
- 4) METHODOLOGY: the assumption is that idiographic intensive study of particular cases will illuminate the subject under study.

**Figure 5      Methodological assumptions of the research process  
adopted for this study**

Moving away from the purely positivist way of looking at all problems or questions, and adopting a reflexive stance, has been one of my biggest learning points during this work. Applying the profile described in Figure 5 above to my research approach to this study, I regard qualitative investigation using ideographic techniques as the most appropriate. My conclusions and the theory I develop in this thesis will, I hope, be a foundation for positivist researchers to test and measure the effects of the various factors I identify.

In contrast to the assumptions I held at the outset of this programme of study, the acknowledgement of the researcher's reflexivity seems to add extra and productive dimensions to the social research process. Instead of using standardised procedures to attempt to remove the (supposedly) interfering effect of the research process, I can use my experience and knowledge to develop the interview relationship and elicit data that would otherwise remain tacit. This I believe provides insight as well as a more critical stance (by not accepting people's *post hoc* rationalisations in interviews for example). And in addition to collecting people's responses to predefined questions, I can use qualitative and reflexive methods to focus on the different experiences of the various participants. How these people construe, make sense of, and experience the process of 360 degree feedback can be examined through a range of alternative, context-rich lines of enquiry. The building of new theory, 'grounded' in this data, becomes achievable.

Denzin (1997) describes qualitative research like this:

*'...although the field of qualitative research is defined by constant breaks and ruptures, there is a shifting center [sic] to the project: the avowed humanistic commitment to study the social world from the perspective of the interacting individual.'* (p. xv)

This may be an oversimplification (the perspective of the individual is not the only view that qualitative researchers take into account in social or social psychological research), but it highlights an important principle of the research approach I adopt for this enquiry.

Because of this sense-making attribute of qualitative research, my research plan was to use qualitative enquiry methods to build theory. My research question is centred on people's perceptions of the 360 degree feedback process, therefore I needed to understand what the range of perceptions might be and then what they are dependent upon. This approach attempts to look at the system from an 'emic' perspective: that is, attempting to work within the conceptual framework of those being studied. Testing of the theory so derived can be more pluralist because these concepts and perceptions can be presented back for comment and evaluation.

In working through this debate towards my eventual research strategy and justification I found one particular quote useful. It is a remark made by Homans in 1949 and quoted by Miles and Huberman (1994:2): *People who write about methodology often forget that it is a matter of strategy, not of morals.*

### **3.4 The methodology for this research study**

#### **Rationale**

A synopsis of the methods used in this study, and the principles of those methods, was given at the beginning of this chapter. In the following sections I provide my rationale for adopting these methods to address my research question.

For this study, the process of selecting appropriate methods evolved over the course of my literature search. As mentioned above, the initial personal challenge was to move away from relying upon operationalised variables and statistical analysis. In addition, there are practical research reasons for adopting the qualitative approach in this project. These reasons were:

- a) The field is already dominated by quantitative psychometric research and my research question addresses an identified gap in the literature, and
- b) In order to make a contribution to knowledge, I needed to break through the various biases and assumptions that pervade the Human Resources/Organisation Development field and which have also influenced and shaped my own views.

Initial thinking suggested a method resting on grounded theory; a theory-building and iterative analysis of interview data. Coupled with the method, which I describe later in this chapter, I have taken an ethnographic approach, with 'ethnography' defined in its broadest sense as a flexible research approach which can encompass a range of methods. In fact, Ethnography as a field of study has no neat definition. Taylor (2001:11) defines it thus: *"Ethnography is a flexible form of research which emphasises the empirical and the use of multiple methods, especially observation. It is concerned with people and their experience and it acknowledges the two-sided nature of the research encounter and the different points of view of those involved"*.

Despite the standard model of organisational research being so reliant on surveys and questionnaires, there are signs that ethnography is becoming more 'respectable' as doubts about whether these standard methods provide adequately grounded data become more apparent.

According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1994): *the aim of ethnography is to assemble an account of the way in which those being studied manage and organise their lives as natural social actors rather than as some homunculi of sociological theory, by trying to obtain an 'insider's' view of the setting.*

Ethnography is similar to, but different from, phenomenology. They are both exploratory, they both use the researcher as the data collection instrument and they both emphasize the need to take a self-conscious approach to research. But a phenomenological approach would try and interpret the subjective experience of the subject, for example an interviewee, and to present and analyse transcriptions fully and look for hidden meaning. My approach, the ethnographic one, is to use the descriptions used by people (within their own organisational cultures) to establish what it is they experience. As a methodology, it stems from anthropological field work. Given my own background of immersion in 360

degree feedback and related consulting work, this technique of research seems particularly appropriate.

### **Decisions on Data Collection Methods**

Collecting data in the time available, and with the detail of context required, suggested that face-to-face interviewing with users of 360 degree feedback would be the most suitable approach for this programme, supplemented by secondary sources such as documentation or third-party interview transcripts where available (evaluation interviews with participants carried out within the organisation to evaluate 360 degree programmes. These were available in Finance company 1 and the mapping agency). Using a survey would provide data but would be less context-rich and difficult to interrogate further.

The interview is the selected method from a range of possible qualitative techniques. Direct or covert observation is not appropriate because of the setting and the timescales associated with 360 degree feedback processes, where typically there is a phase of communication to brief the participants and their raters followed by a period set aside for completion of the feedback questionnaires and then a phase of report collation followed by delivery of the feedback. The process can thus take from two weeks to two months to complete. In addition, collecting opinions and attitudes requires a period of reflection and evaluation by the participant.

According to Banister *et al* (1994) there are four main reasons for conducting interviews for research:

- 1) We are concerned with subjective meanings
- 2) We can explore issues which are too complex to study by quantitative methods
- 3) It affords us a degree of reflexivity and the opportunity to acknowledge this in our conduct and analysis
- 4) It allows the 'power-relationship' of the research process to be considered.

The first two are methodological considerations which suggest that interviews can generate the kind of data I need in an efficient, recognisable and acceptable (to clients) format. The last two reasons seem to highlight the issue of reflexivity and involvement, seen by positivists as potential disadvantages of the process, especially if the interview is of the unstructured, non-standardised kind. But by collecting data through relatively unstructured

interviews it should be possible to achieve a balance between the two potentially conflicting motives of:

- minimising the researcher's own influence on what is said and,
- getting a full expression of opinions and feelings about the topic in question.

The word 'balance' is useful here; it reflects the epistemological dualism described above where the reflexivity of the researcher would be regarded by positivists as a source of bias that must be removed, but by (phenomenological) postmodernists as a source of interpretation, an issue I return to below. In reality the interview does need some structure – an outline of the research plan and its aims, a start point for the interviewee to think about, and some guidance about the depth of answers required. Once begun, however, the interventions can be minimal. And being able to respond to and develop issues, perhaps unpredicted, can make the unstructured interview a flexible and productive research tool. My observations provide the 'thick description' described by Denzin (1978) of actors' interpretations by examining the motives, meanings, contexts and circumstances of their experiences.

Despite the need to be open during the interview itself, in order to differentiate the approach from the 'standard' case-study description (see section 3.10.2 for further discussion of case-study research) and make it more open to comparative analysis later on, some specific demographic and background items were also collected: gender, length of service, age and others (discussed in the section on Results).

### **A practical consideration - gaining entry**

I needed participants who were willing to talk about their experiences in some depth and for up to an hour, but getting people to talk to a researcher can be difficult in an operational environment in which appraisal may be a sensitive matter. This can be not only from the individual's point of view but also from the organisation's – periods of transition or difficult trading conditions can block access completely. Interference at sensitive times is viewed harshly and getting people to devote up to an hour can also be problematic. Survey overload can also be a factor.

Time is also a factor which affects the negotiation process itself. Setting up research interviews is unlikely to be a major priority for a manager acting as gatekeeper or sponsor and there are pragmatic considerations on my part too: costs, time and distance.

For this work the selection of settings is restricted to corporate or institutional environments because I needed to speak to people in large organisations with a significant investment in 360 degree feedback and performance management systems. Although the 360 degree review method is common practice, people's availability for this type of research is restricted so I elected to try to use previous clients so that I can easily identify the most likely gatekeepers and sponsors. This would not be possible using 'broader brush' methods such as advertising for volunteers, cold-calling, or looking for individuals regardless of their organisational setting.

In one instance I tried indirect methods of gaining entry through a third party consulting group who have launched 360 degree feedback for UK teachers and headteachers. This proved noticeably slower and less certain than my more direct approaches. Relationship building with the 'gatekeeper' to the participating organisation is one probable reason. Another is that a third party will be less committed to developing the opportunity if busy with other matters. I explore the issue further in the next section.

### **Examples of Practical Difficulties in Gaining Entry**

I had assumed that being a consultant in management development actively or recently engaged with clients using the 360 degree software system I had developed had put me in a good position for gaining entry. But in fact there were many difficulties in getting people in client organisations to agree to collaboration. After some weeks of frustration I was aware that joint ventures in research programmes like this had to be 'sold'.

One of the main barriers appeared to be a perception by the client 'gatekeeper' that certain organisational factors would be obstacles and that any form of evaluation could disrupt and harm internal relationships. The organisations that reacted in this way were all UK public sector ones. I suspect that examination of these attitudes would yield useful results, but for this PhD work, time and access were going to be pressing concerns.

Persistence in contacting ex-clients and also making new contacts through associates brought some success. One example is worth describing in a little more detail because it demonstrates the difficulties that potential collaborators perceive as obstacles and must therefore work around.

I had a work associate who had recently left a company of management consultants. As a result of an email in which I stated that I needed to find interviewees, I was introduced to a key stakeholder within the consultancy, a project manager for their Transforming Learning programme (a programme for the appraisal and development of Teachers and Headteachers in the UK). Part of the programme allows teachers to use an online 360 degree feedback instrument. Access to users of this would give me an excellent pool of interviewees from an important sector which was also new to such processes.

Even a 'warm' contact such as this proved slow and fraught with difficulty. After references and positive encouragement from my contact, I still had to persist with phone calls, then justify my case with the Hay contact, and then provide documentary summaries and personal CV information so that I could move into the organisation and talk with a consultant at the sharp end of the programme. The reason for this slow but sequential advance was that the project manager, in his own words, '*acts as a broker trying to link together different groups with different perspectives and priorities*'. This is a valid point and one which may well apply to the role of gatekeeper in similar settings. At any point in our introductory conversation there was the risk that he would feel that the effort of the collaboration would not yield enough benefit. This meant that I had to sell the idea and support this with a suitably attractive proposition – but specifically for this set of circumstances.

I was required to provide a summary of my research aims and my own background, which my contact could then take forward himself. This meant that all the momentum for carrying the research forward depended on one person's interest and several months later he had ruled out the prospect of collaboration until some internal business priorities had been resolved.

Delays occurred at two other organisations under similar circumstances. It seems that the conditions for gaining entry need to be met precisely – the equilibrium is delicate and any perceived risk is seen as a valid reason for putting organisational research on hold. Clearly

the best starting point would be to have as sponsor a post-holder (committed to the research) in the organisation who has authority over the gatekeeper(s).

### **3.5 Data Collection**

For the first phase of the work, in establishing the various aspects of the 360 degree process which people value and regard positively, collection of the main data was by interview. The initial stages of this project were exploratory in nature, conforming to a grounded theory approach which will be examined below.

The interviewees are managers. They are also participants in 360 degree feedback programmes. They therefore have had access to the 'classic' 360 degree range of feedback sources: self, boss, colleagues and subordinates. The research question is about differences in participant views of the 360 degree feedback process. To address this question, participants' perceptions (personal cognitive evaluations of their experience) were explored through interview. The research question would then be informed by understanding of the factors that affect these perceptions. Perception is regarded here as a cognitive evaluation of an experience. Perceptions of the same experience by different people can differ and it is part of the current study's aim to explore whether these perceptions can be moderated in some way, by understanding the range of perceptions that arise and what it is about the experience that may influence them.

As mentioned in the synopsis of methods at the head of this chapter, the interview format was based on the 'critical incident technique' (CIT) devised by Flanagan (1954). Chell (1998) suggests that this technique is one which can be used across the various research paradigms, positivist or non-positivist based, it being an interview method that was originally used as a 'scientific' tool and now an investigative one. Hettlage and Steinlin (2006:7) suggest that '*critical incident interviewing skills alone will not be as helpful in analysing a certain field of interest as a person with in-depth knowledge of a certain field who has more ability to create, conduct and analyse the critical incidents*'. The more an interviewer is an expert in a certain field the better the critical incidents story he/she can come up with and the easier for the ethnographic researcher to place the answers in the right context.

The method is intended to capture the thought processes, the frame of reference and the feelings about an incident which has meaning for the interviewee. The aim is to gain an understanding of the incident from the perspective of the interviewee. I have amended the definition of incident to cover a process which may last for several weeks.

The critical incident technique is a method for getting a subjective report while minimising interference from stereotypical reactions or received opinions. Most importantly critical incident technique '*minimises the effect of desired answers as the interviewees are drawn into the story. The user is asked to focus on one or more critical incidents which they could experience personally in the field of activity being analysed*' (Hettlage and Steinlin, 2006:7). For its use in the present study, questioning follows a series of 'incidents' that make up the total experience of 360 degree feedback, asking people to describe significant aspects of the 360 degree review process they have experienced. At the outset of each interview I suggest that the interviewee provides a time-line so that I can check back on the chronology and also so that the interviewee has a frame of reference for his or her responses and narrative.

There are distinct phases to the interview, which vary in duration according to the starting point of the interviewee, but which nevertheless comprise:

- an introduction to the research,
- a focusing of the interviewee's attention on the theme,
- actions to control the interview through appropriate questioning and interventions,
- a distinct conclusion and an opportunity to address any ethical issues.

The types of questions asked of interviewees were to lead people into describing experiences and then to probe to get as full an understanding as possible of what the interviewee was describing. This meant preventing interviewees theorizing or extrapolating from their experience and keeping them at a descriptive level, concentrating on describing their experience: what happened, how they felt, what was said.

Since the research question is to explore differences between people's experiences it was the aim of the interviews to establish as clearly as possible what participant perceptions of the process were throughout their experience of the programme. By asking interviewees first to describe the whole experience (from initial briefing to the end of a development plan) it was possible to build a timeline, note the salient experiences along that timeline

and then revisit those experiences and probe for descriptions of perceptions and feelings about these events. The probing is also to check the reliability of what people are saying.

The essential feature of this kind of interview is to elicit a story from the interviewee. The questioning will vary between one interview and the next depending on how the story is told and how much prompting and probing is required to provide a clear vision of the salient incidents during the participant's experience of 360 degree feedback. The first request at the beginning of the interview is to ask for the timeline parameters (start, finish, incidents that occurred, problems that may have interfered with the process, such as work or home circumstances, and so on). Once the timeline is established and salient points identified, the interviewee is asked to describe the events in sequence, going into enough detail to make things clear to the researcher what has happened and how they felt at the time. Different interviewees require more or less help (or challenge) with the telling of their story.

Examples of the types of question asked are as follows. Firstly, to establish the context and origins of the salient incidents questions of this type were used:

- What, in your view, led up to the event? (Followed, as with all questions, by probing if details are not clear).
- How did you react to the event?

For trying to identify the interviewee's behaviour:

- What did you do when this happened?
- How did you react to the person you were dealing with?
- What reaction did you see from that person? Did your feelings change as a result?
- Were you motivated by this event or not?
- How did you cope with feeling uninspired by this event/person?

For exploring the perceived consequences of the various events of the timeline:

- What was the outcome of what you did at that time?
- Was the outcome down to what you did or was it something else? How do you link what you did with the outcome?
- What did you observe being done, or not being done?
- What resulted that led you to believe that the outcome was effective or ineffective?

This type of interview, based as it is on descriptions and checking of those descriptions by questioning, will elicit a number of perceptions that the interviewee has made about the

event. These articulation of perceptions comprise the data being sought, perceptions, as cognitive evaluations of personal experience, being precursors of attitudes (intentions to behave in particular ways towards the process) and feelings towards the process of 360 degree feedback.

Actions to control the interview are by variations on question type. In drawing out opinions, feelings and attitudes I needed to encourage the interviewee to present a narrative around their responses. This requires a combination of open-ended questions combined with probing of detail, generally through asking the respondent what happened at a particular stage and then following up with a question on what he or she saw, said or felt at that time. And to encourage the inclusion of context this may need further probing, summarising, checking back and re-phrasing. It is important to get as much detail as possible when examining what the interviewee regards as important. This is the 'rich context' regarded as a benefit of qualitative research.

By using this interview technique I provide an environment that encourages a conversational exchange, where my own reflexivity can be acknowledged and used and where I can also avoid my own bias as much as possible through eliciting the free and open expression of the interviewee's opinions. And where the bias may emanate from the interviewee (for example, a senior manager may take a 'systems view' and analyse the issues from a business angle rather than provide personal information on their own attitude), the probing nature of the questions can reduce this effect.

Throughout the interviews I made thorough notes and also tape-recorded the meetings. After each interview I went through my notes and listened to the tape at the same time, adding and annotating my original notes with additional comments missed during the interview itself. This full set of notes was then recorded as a single narrative and transcribed into a word-processor. From here the transcription could be imported directly into the qualitative analysis software N6, which is described in Appendix One, and with an example of a report of coding in Appendix Four.

### **Conducting the Interviews**

I controlled the interview by using variations on question type. In drawing out opinions, feelings and attitudes I needed to encourage people to present a narrative around their

responses. This required a combination of open-ended questions combined with probing of detail, generally through asking the respondent what happened at a particular stage and then following up with a question on what he or she saw, said, or felt at that time. And to encourage additional context information this often needed further probing, summarising, checking back and re-phrasing. It was always important for me to get as much detail as possible when I heard that the interviewee regarded something as being important. This is the 'rich context' regarded in many texts as a benefit of qualitative research.

I should emphasise that although over the course of a two hour interview I asked a lot of questions, I did try to make it appear as a discussion and to avoid the 'male style of research interviewing' of question-and-answer (Taylor 2001:48). But where I occasionally suspected bias from the interviewee (especially where the interviewee is perhaps a senior manager with a tendency to '*post-hoc* analyse' the issues rather than provide information on their own attitude), the introduction of probing questions proved useful in validating a remark. For example when a manager said '*the process encourages a productive and catalytic dialogue between me and my manager*' the appearance of a phrase sounding as well-rehearsed as this meant that I would ask for examples and details of what this '*catalysis*' and '*dialogue*' actually looked and felt like to the interviewee.

Throughout the interviews I made notes as thoroughly as possible and also tape-recorded the meetings. I experienced no problems when I suggested recording. I use this method also as part of my consulting work, where I often interview people as part of organisational development assignments and have found that it is such a widespread method that people in managerial positions do not ever say that they regard it as an issue. This has not been the case when I have wanted to talk to, say, people working on a shop-floor, where there is sometimes evidence of suspicion or concern.

Using the recordings, I annotated my original notes with additional comments I may have missed during the interview itself. This full set of notes was then recorded as a single narrative and transcribed into a word-processor. From here the transcription could be imported directly into the qualitative analysis software.

I had no fixed list of questions, just a reminder at the bottom of each page of my notebook of the research question. This helped me to look out for, and avoid, deviations from the

topic into interesting (to me as well as the interviewee) but less fruitful directions. So the questions I asked were broad, open-ended ones such as

*‘Perhaps you can tell me how you first started using the 360 degree method’*, and whenever a point cropped up that was not apparently specific or clear, to then follow up with

*‘Could you give me an example of when you felt annoyed/pleased about....’* or some such. This would lead into further questions about how the interviewee felt, or what he or she had said. I found that this approach gave me a feeling of being flexible and that there appeared to be a natural exchange of views rather than a question and answer session. I reviewed the recordings with this thought in mind to check I had not deluded myself on this. On the negative side, I also found that because of being quite relaxed and interested I seemed to talk too much when I should have been listening more. Again, listening to the tape recordings of the interviews confirmed this.

This process was used with all of my face to face interviews. The telephone interviews were not recorded but they did follow the guidelines I set out above. The interviews have provided me with a good deal of material for analysis and I am pleased with the way they went. My reservations are around bias (mine and the interviewees’), which I will have considered during my analysis. But despite being intent on using grounded theory and using data from previous interviews to guide the direction of future ones, I have felt that I have stuck closer to the critical incident method rather more tightly than necessary, imposing a constraint on the interview that may prevent one or more factors being thoroughly explored.

(If the project was larger scale I would look at deploying another interviewer (or more) to not only collect more data but also to introduce more critical feedback on our approach. It would also enable me to swap transcripts to compare coding. Even with this small sample, I have followed up with a small online survey to elicit any further comments from the participants so the feasibility of triangulation of methods (Holland, 2001:40) would be another thing to consider in scaling up my project.)

### **Researcher roles and their effects on data being collected**

The organisational researcher can collect data through direct (covert or open) observation, or by observing events by physically taking the perspective of the participant, or through

interviews. Or a mixture of these approaches. The information a researcher collects from informants can be unsolicited as well as solicited and the relative contributions to the data from each of these sources depends on such factors as trust and the perception of the researcher's true motives. It seems to me that the role adopted by the researcher can moderate these reactions.

Hammersley and Atkinson cite an interesting example of this phenomenon when they quote from Okely's 1983 research with Gypsies (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:127). Here the presence of the researcher as an 'inquisitor' directly affects the consistency and reliability of the data (the Gypsy's natural reaction to questions is apparently to become evasive or vague but to allow the questioner to go away feeling that questions have been answered). But once the researcher adopted a more passive role it yielded better quality information.

A researcher within an organisation may have a perceived as well as an actual role and the perceived role is the more difficult to predict or control under certain circumstances. For example, Hey (in Taylor, 2001:73) in her study of girl's relationships in different types of secondary school was seen by some staff as an observer, as planned, but also as one with a feminist perspective to her work. The observer role appears to have been more easily accepted by the girls of the study, despite Hey's feelings of there being a power difference between her and them. So data was available through her interactions and relationships with the pupils, but her access to those pupils may have been restricted because of her role as perceived by the staff, thus reducing the range of data that was available.

For my own project, I consciously attempted to take the defined role of interviewer. Whilst questions used by participant observers can be seen as threatening in some field situations, interviewers are expected to ask questions. The variation in quality of the data collected will then depend upon the selection of questioning type and the presentation and delivery of them, along with the way the event itself is managed.

By adopting the explicit role of interviewer in my project I set out to provide an environment that encouraged a conversational exchange, where my own reflexivity could be acknowledged and used and where I could also avoid my own bias as much as possible through building rapport and eliciting the free and open expression of the interviewee's opinions.

Holland (2001:47) cites Hammersley and Atkinson's two motives for conducting interviews: for information and for perspective. Holland suggests that there is potential overlap and I believe this to be particularly applicable to my project. I see links to my interest in looking at my research question from two angles. To address my research question I needed to understand not only the context and organisational culture that lies behind, and perhaps influences, people's attitudes, but also the 'insider' knowledge these people have of being participants in the 360 degree system. The reason I need both of these perspectives is that the context may well be as important a determinant of a fulfilling or useful experience as any of the other factors or circumstances that people may describe. I therefore needed to adopt a research role that would elicit responses about the depth and intensity of people's experiences, in an atmosphere of cooperation. Hence the interview setting I decided upon.

The question of whether solicited accounts through interviewing are less valid than those which are unsolicited arose in my mind as I conducted these meetings. My own reactivity was evident: I supplemented my questions with paraphrasing and feeding back of people's responses as I checked understanding and demonstrated that I was listening. I found it difficult to completely extricate my own contributions from the real opinions and feelings being expressed. Honing of interview technique (particularly disciplining myself to say less when I really want to discuss or probe a particularly interesting topic) may well reduce this distorting effect, but the cost may be the loss of rapport, which I believe allows the interviewee to be more open and forthcoming with his or her views. Thus the non-directive interview method described by Hammersley and Atkinson (1998:129) may need to be balanced by a degree of directive questioning simply to guide and motivate the interviewee. These authors go on to show that bias can also be present in the non-directive approach also, and conclude that the aim of the researcher is not to get bias-free data, but to discover the right way of interpreting that data. I believe that this is also a practical way of dealing with the problem of getting data about ideas, feelings and opinions in organisational settings. The interview setting is a good way for me to collect such information in a condensed and manageable manner, with a clear briefing, start point and end-point for the interviewee. My role, then, was deliberately intended to derive data of this sort.

## **Errors and sample sizes in qualitative studies**

The question of sampling in qualitative analysis is handled differently from similar questions in a quantitative study. Statistical comparisons account for the variance in quantitative measures, which means that specific types of error can creep in, errors which can lead to drawing the wrong conclusion.

In quantitative studies of 360 degree feedback a good deal of statistical work centres on differences between rating scores under different circumstances, in order to better understand how well the instrument works under these conditions. Comparing results between one group and another (or several others) is in common use (Fletcher, 1999). But with quantitative studies, a common criticism (Robson, 1994) is that over-reliance on significance testing can lead to poor analysis, in particular when researchers assume that significance is equivalent in statistical terms to ‘importance’.

Sampling techniques of positivist researchers thus include methodical acknowledgement of random effects and this is reflected in the way samples are selected. The phenomenological researcher on the other hand will not select people on this basis.

The danger of using subjective assessment of a sample is that bias will be introduced. For the first phase of my study I selected my samples as so-called ‘purposive samples’ (Remenyi, 1998:194), where individuals were selected on the basis of being positive recipients of 360 degree feedback. Such a sample is not statistically representative of the overall population of 360 degree feedback recipients: the intention is to find people with the knowledge and experience that can contribute to my theory-building.

In this study I have taken an ethnographic approach to selecting my samples. Hammersley (1995) suggests that selection of cases is supplemented by selection of samples within cases too and that there are three main dimensions to consider: time, people and context. For me, the time-scale of people’s experience of 360 degree feedback was significant: it had to be recent (within a year and preferably six months so that memories were fresh and also so that the systems used were relatively up to date) and it also had to be a complete experience. The people had to be those who wanted to give their opinions as fully as possible because I needed data rich in context. And the overall context itself was to be organisational – businesses or institutions of several thousand employees with an

operational appraisal system. I was not interested in this study in the application of 360 degree systems into smaller or less mature organisations.

I made the point above about the quantitative method of increasing sample size to measure an effect. Another claim made as a result of doing this is that the study becomes more 'generalisable' to the overall population. But the argument that adding to the sample simply makes effects more likely seems also to apply to generalisability – adding more cases also means that meaning can be lost in the process of categorisation, so that a rather bland generalisation can result. This means that an optimal balance needs to be achieved: the main effect is amplified by using a larger sample but with concomitant loss of sense and additional meaning.

Kirk and Miller (1986) suggest that the very process of 'fieldworking' (face-to-face contact with people) automatically creates a testing of the data and of the emerging hypothesis.

Various forms of triangulation (by using entirely different additional methods, or by collecting data from different settings, or letting other researchers examine the data) are suggested by many authors for improving validity, but there are disagreements over their efficacy amongst researchers (Giles (2002): 221). In the next section I look at the arguments around how the relevance of the research evidence can be accounted for during the data collection process by using Grounded Theory and the influence this methodology has had on my own research design.

### **3.6 Methodological considerations for the analysis**

As described in the introduction to this chapter, I used three established qualitative methods to collect and process the data. In practice, the three methods are entwined and collection and analysis proceed in parallel. I will describe the three component methods separately first, so that methodological rationale can be clearly linked to the research aims, and then describe how they were deployed.

### 3.7 The Grounded Theory

#### **A note on Grounded Theory and the use of researchers' 'insider knowledge'**

There is a term coined by Glaser (1978) to describe a quality required of an effective user of Grounded Theory. The term is 'theoretical sensitivity' and it describes an awareness of the various shades of meaning presented by research data. The grounded theory approach is a qualitative research method which uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived (grounded) theory about a phenomenon. By using the method "you do not begin with a theory and look to prove it. Instead you allow what is relevant to the study to emerge so that the method builds theory" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 208).

According to Strauss (1990), theoretical sensitivity stems from familiarity with the literature, professional experience, personal experience and insight into the analytic process. For me, professional experience in particular contributes to my own level of sensitivity towards this research question – my time as a practitioner in management consulting and as a provider of 360 degree feedback services to organisations give me an insight into the range of organisational settings in which 360 degree feedback operates.

The grounded theory method was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as an alternative to the orthodox sociological enquiry method of the time, which was to use data to test hypotheses that came from previous literature on the topic. Instead, grounded theory derives theory *from* the data, typically through interpreting texts of some sort, which in my particular case are transcriptions of interviews.

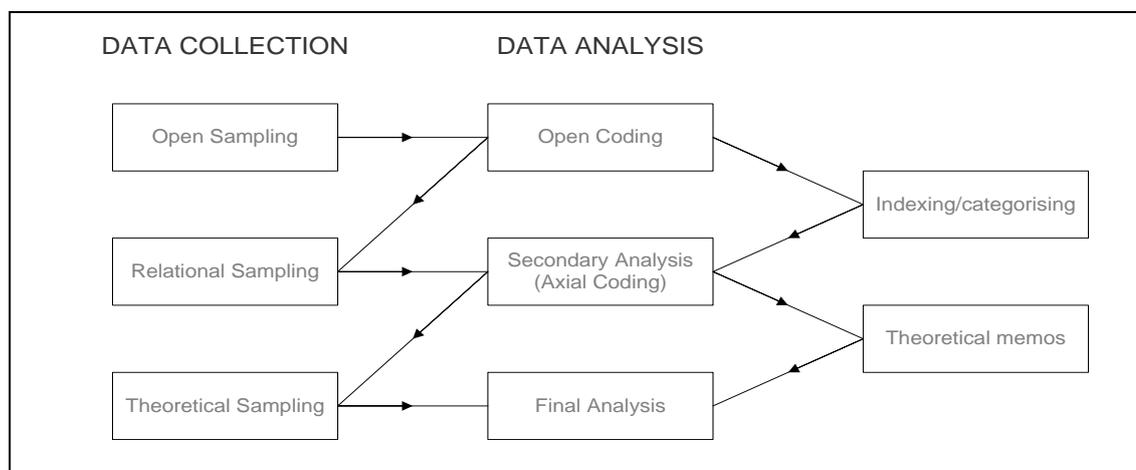
One problem with defining this method is that the two original authors have gone on to develop their theory in different ways. They have also publicly disagreed with each other about their respective directions. But despite this dispute there are still some generally agreed points about the approach:

1. It is a theory-building method
2. It is 'data-driven' and therefore an inductive approach (as opposed to deductive)
3. The analysis of qualitative data is systematic
4. Data analysis and data collection occur concurrently so that analysis feeds into research design.

## The method of grounded theory

The analytic process goes through a series of steps, the first stage being to organise data into categories (coding) and to look for patterns. This should generate concepts that can make sense of the data, and these concepts can then be examined to see if there are interrelationships that build up some sort of model. Although there are steps, the process is not linear: the analysis is iterative with constant comparisons of the data with the emerging concepts. This iterative process represents something of a contrast with the statistical analyses used in quantitative methods.

I do not propose to give a complete description of grounded theory method here. One reason is that it is flexible and therefore takes slightly different formats in the hands of different researchers. Another is that there are many texts that deal with this particularly well (for example Strauss and Corbin, (1990), Taylor (2001), Giles (2002)). But there are some key stages that I have found particularly useful in my own work and these are at the heart of the original method. I have summarised these steps in figure 6 below in the form of a chart :



**Figure 6 Stages in the grounded theory process (after Giles, 2002: 168)**

The three stages of data collection are interspersed with the ongoing data analysis and the overall effect is to make categories and explore them, with the final theoretical sampling stage providing the material for constructing the overall theory. But within this format there is also flexibility to change direction depending on the kind of data from each sampling.

The data analysis follows the same pattern, beginning with producing a large number of categories from the first supply of data, followed by further refinement into a smaller

number of broader categories. Once a category cannot be added to by any more examples from the data it is said to be ‘theoretically saturated’, meaning that any further additions would simply duplicate what is already there.

At the secondary analysis stage I have started to collect the codes into more abstract ‘concepts’ and the idea at this point onwards is to look for explanatory frameworks by seeing how these concepts may interrelate. Memos (notes made at the time and attached to each concept) are particularly useful here as a way of building up ideas about why the concepts appear important as they occur to me when I read the transcripts. By keeping a series of memos over time I can use them as the basis for creating higher order categories.

I used these stages of collection and analysis throughout the project and used the qualitative analysis software QSR-N6 (See Appendix One) to collate and sort the text units of data and also to compile a complete collection of memos over the course of my research. An example of some memo text written during the course of my research is provided as Appendix Five

The final result of this grounded theory process is to produce a core category or an explanatory process or model. At this stage of my work I took Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) recommendations for evaluating this kind of theory. These criteria are:

1. The theory is *representative* by being based on a variety of original data sources.
2. It is *comprehensible* to people who are familiar with 360 degree feedback.
3. It provides *generality* in that it is capable of being applied in other contexts.
4. It should also provide a basis for *action*, even if only as a model for further research.

I have used this list of criteria as a practical framework for checking the reliability, validity and generalisability of my research. As Kirk and Miller point out in their monograph on validity (Kirk & Miller (1986)): *...qualitative research can be performed as social science and can be evaluated in terms of objectivity.....the problem of validity is handled by field research and the problem of reliability is handled by documented ethnographic decision-making.*

The *representative* quality of the results is an indicator of validity and I have used general data triangulation (with information about background culture and history, from my own knowledge of organisational contexts, and from anecdotal and additional survey data) where possible. I have also used a specific form of triangulation, ‘respondent evaluation’, which involves providing participants with my (interim) analyses for them to check, as for example with the Security Company (see Appendix Two).

Reliability is linked partly with the point about *comprehensibility*. My grounded theory approach included the documentation of my research process (all the collected data, their coding and the associated memos are provided in the Appendix ). As Elliott *et al* (1999) have suggested, “*it may be enough that the findings of a study “resonate with the reader” for them to be considered reliable and I consider this to be another interpretation of the term ‘comprehensibility’.*”

Achieving *generality* has been an underlying purpose of this work: to use the data I collected, without preconception, to build a theory that can be described by a broadly applicable model. My approach of using multiple case-study settings allowed me to test and develop the analytic generality of my emerging concepts and findings. This was analytic in the sense that I was determining the conditions where my model holds.

This leads to the last criterion, the platform for *action*. The development of a model with analytic generality provides the basis of an instrument for application in a range of organisational settings, an instrument with predictive validity.

### **3.8 Reflexivity**

A particularly important concept in the ethnographic approach to research is the notion of reflexivity, which is also closely allied to the definition of theoretical sensitivity described at the outset of this chapter. By exercising reflexive awareness throughout the study I have been able to balance my commitment to realism with the ability to be flexible and adaptable in each interview. Following up lines of enquiry that are new or unpredicted was possible because my experience, I believe, allowed me to judge what was and what was not relevant.

As Taylor (2002) suggests, if it is not possible for any researcher to be fully objective then it follows that any account of a research project is an interpretation rather than an objective description.

### **3.9 Assumptions about Performance Feedback**

Personal development plans (PDPs) are a way of translating feedback into an improvement in performance, as long as certain organisational criteria for PDP implementation are met, such as incorporating PDP s into appraisal processes and the provision of support to users (Tamkin, 1995). Many 360 degree feedback systems are linked closely with some sort of PDP process as a semi-formalised outcome, whether the system is used as a career development tool or more as a supplement to appraisal.

As discussed earlier in Chapter Two, it is commonly assumed by HR practitioners that the presence of the feedback system plus the development planning system will result, to some extent, in a defined pathway from an identified development need towards an improvement target.

This research took a grounded theory approach, first exploring with people whether they engaged with the 360 degree feedback process positively and enthusiastically. From this there emerged some ‘core concepts’, one of which being the relationships that participants had with their managers and subordinates. An expected core concept, based on the feedback models discussed above, was that a supportive environment for a personal development plan would in some way be implicated.

Because of these expectations it was necessary to be as open-minded about each interview as possible and to allow the direction of the discussion to be determined by the interviewee, but at the same time controlling the event and keeping the discussion relevant. This meant that the first set of interviews was devoted to collecting as much data from people in the time available as possible, rather than following up and emphasising potentially likely factors. Although this was not complete adherence to the Grounded Theory approach of moving towards theoretical sampling, I felt that for the first data gathering stage it was important to have a method for reducing my own bias.

### **3.10 Collecting the Data**

#### **The Settings – the interview environment**

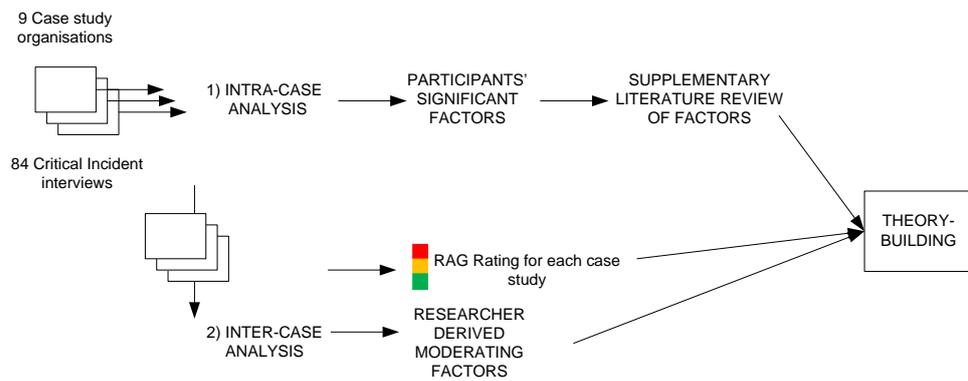
This section reports on the first phase of the research, which examined the attitudes people expressed about their experiences of the 360 degree feedback process. Here I was looking for descriptions of positive experiences, supported by rationale and examples of why people felt the process worked for them.

The data collection began a number of years after the 360 degree method had been introduced into the UK and a time when the method was well known and widely used. To carry out my research I had been arranging interviews with managers in large corporate institutions where the 360 degree feedback process is used. These are the kinds of environment where there is a history of usage and where the outcomes from my study are likely to be applied.

The people interviewed provided ‘insider accounts’ (Hammersley, 1995:124) of experiences of using this appraisal technique. I selected an interview-based approach, partly because of the efficiency of this method in collecting the range of experiences and ideas of these people, and partly because the overall experience I was exploring was extended over time and was not directly observable.

#### **The process of data collection and analysis**

Figure 7 below summarises graphically the research process, illustrating the two stages of the case-study analyses which provided the participant and the researcher perspectives.



**Figure 7** Diagram of the data collection and analysis process

The data analysis was divided into two parts in order to combine the researcher perspective across all cases with the participants' views (of their own experiences). The first data analysis stage, the within-case study analysis, was used to code the interview transcripts for significant themes. These were the *participant* views. The second stage of the analysis, the between-case-study analysis, examined the differences and similarities between cases to explore the likely interactions between these thematic codes and the contexts in which they arise. This provided the additional insights from the *researcher* perspective. The aims of the two stages are summarised below:

### **Data Analysis (1)**

The aim of this stage was to gain a full understanding of participant perceptions of experiencing 360 degree feedback.

### **Data Analysis (2)**

The next stage of the analysis provided the researcher perspective, based on comparing and contrasting all cases on an inter-case as well as an intra-case basis.

Each interview ended with a standard question: 'do you regard your experience of 360 degree feedback as positive?' The set of answers to this question for all participants in all case studies could then be compared. Red/Amber/Green colour coding (RAG) was used to distinguish between the different overall responses to 360 degree feedback experiences in different organisations. Overall feelings were assessed as being either very positive (G), positive with reservations (A), and Less positive (R).

Since interviewees could not comment on overall (case) circumstances and differences, this researcher perspective was a useful addition to that generated by the participant views from Data Analysis (1).

### **Data collection through the Critical Incident Method**

The interview format was based on the ‘critical incident technique’ (CIT) devised by Flanagan (1954). Chell (1998) suggests that this technique is one which can be used across the various research paradigms, positivist or non-positivist based, it being an interview method that was originally used as a ‘scientific’ tool and now an investigative one (McClelland, 1998).

The method is intended to capture the thought processes, the frame of reference and the feelings about an incident that have meaning for the interviewee, and the aim is to gain an understanding of the incident from the perspective of the interviewee. I have amended the definition of ‘incident’ to cover a process which may last for several weeks.

My approach departs from the CIT in having structure imposed upon the question-and-answer format. Whereas the standard CIT will ask the respondent to select three significant events, two positive and one negative, my questioning is more general in that I ask people just to describe significant aspects of the 360 degree review process they have experienced. As with the CIT, I suggest that the interviewee provides a time-line so that I can check back on the chronology and also so that the interviewee has a frame of reference for his or her responses and narrative.

### **3.11 Analysis**

Data came from the interviews that I conducted (from the interview transcripts) and also from short validation surveys I provided as a follow-up to interview sessions.

Taylor (2001:73) cites Mannen’s suggestion that qualitative research can have three distinct phases or ‘moments’: fieldwork, writing, and reading. There is no explicit mention of ‘data-analysis’ as such, implying that the analysis itself is embedded within all of these stages. And Miles and Huberman (1994:10) describe qualitative data analysis as having three components: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing. This fits with their

rather formal model of qualitative research, with its strong emphasis on data display, but also allows them to place these stages of analysis interactively within the data collection period.

In the Grounded Theory technique, the combination of coding and sampling and the conversion of earlier codes (the 'sensitising concepts' described by Blumer (1954)) into conceptual categories make it essential that the analysis begins before the data collection is completed. As Hammersley (1995:212) points out, the sensitising concepts can '*provide a focus for further data collection*'.

So in qualitative research in general, the distinction between data collection and data analysis may not always be clear-cut. Creating, testing and modifying categories is an iterative process, meaning that data analysis is, as Potter (1996:120) says: '*...an organic whole that begins in the data gathering stage and does not end until the writing is complete*'

### **The Interview Data**

Interview data were converted into transcript form by supplementing my written notes with additions from the recorded conversations. The text files containing these transcripts were then imported into the QSR N6 software so that coding and subsequent sorting and memo writing would be rapid and also allow for linking across case studies.

Each interview transcript was entered as a separate document and coded separately. The codes generated by the first document analysed represented the earliest attempts at identifying themes. These codes would then be applied to the next interview transcript where appropriate and new codes added if necessary. This process was repeated for each subsequent transcript, resulting in a large number of coded themes. This represents the initial 'open coding' of Grounded Theory.

This coding process examined the transcript texts sentence by sentence, not all of which were code-able. This intensity of coding is one way of reducing bias according to Charmaz (1995:38) by forcing me to make the 'familiar seem new'. This approach distinguishes Grounded Theory from content analysis in that the codes are not predetermined (Giles, 2001:170). The intention was to encourage more creativity in my theory-building.

I followed this open coding stage with a phase of ‘focused coding’ where I tried to integrate the first group of codes into broader, more conceptual categories. So, for example, where my open coding of sentences had provided an array of themes such as:

*The properties of the rating scale*

*Ambiguity of the items*

*Factors outside the model not measured*

*Leniency of scores*

*Relevance of items to role*

I found that these very specific issues could be clustered under a broader category, that of ‘*Data Collection*’. This category would clearly represent a range of contributory factors but would be quite distinct from another category, such as ‘*Trust*’, which would in turn comprise a cluster of indicators. At this stage it is possible to tolerate duplication of some of the open codings in amongst the focused codes. Later analysis and probing may provide explanations which perhaps depend on such cross-links. The two categories of ‘*Data Collection*’ and ‘*Trust*’ is a possible example – the original coding of ‘*leniency of scores*’ could also be interpreted as a dimension of the ‘trust’ between rater and the subject of the 360 degree feedback.

The result of this process of analysis is the development of a list of discrete categories, each of which is defined fully in the context of the research, with the facility, through the N6 software, to track back from the category heading right down to particular sentences used in the original interviews. Throughout my data collection and analysis I use the term ‘Theme’ as a general term for my focussed codes.

‘Saturation’ of categories can occur after a number of interviews in one setting, which in Grounded Theory means that no new variations on the theme are forthcoming. For example, after 10 in-depth interviews with the Security Company managers and directors ( a total of 20 interview hours), the categories ‘levelled out’ at a total of eleven separate clusters (listed on page 116) which are the main themes to have emerged from all the interviews within that case-study. No new information appeared after this. To examine the emerging theory more closely I then needed to look either at different organisational settings or at a different kind of population within the Security Company, perhaps a group

of more junior managers. Because of the commercial need to maintain a good working relationship and to avoid being seen to interfere too much, I was happy to use completely different organisations instead, rather than try to extract more data from the one organisation.

**Organising the analytical framework: using a systematic Case-Study approach**

According to Eisenhardt (2001), the framework for building theories from case-study research combines the qualitative methods described by Miles and Huberman (1984) with the design of case-study research described by Yin (1981) and the Grounded Theory of Glaser and Strauss described above. This framework is summarised in Table 1 below:

<b>Step</b>	<b>Activity</b>
<i>Getting started</i>	Definition of research question Consider possible <i>a priori</i> constructs
<i>Selecting cases</i>	Theoretical sampling, not random Specified population
<i>Developing instruments and protocols</i>	Interview techniques and rationale
<i>Entering the field</i>	Overlapping of data collection and analysis Flexibility in data collection methods
<i>Analysing data</i>	Within-case analysis Cross-case pattern search using divergent techniques Iterative tabulation of evidence for each construct
<i>Shaping hypotheses</i>	Replication (not sampling) logic across cases
<i>Enfolding literature</i>	Comparison with conflicting literature Comparison with similar literature
<i>Reaching closure</i>	Theoretical saturation where possible

**Table 1 Process of building theory from case-study research (after Eisenhardt, 2007)**

The division of my research work into ‘case-study’ blocks does not entirely fit the definitions of case-study research provided by researchers such as Yin (1981). Typically, case-studies combine data collection methods (interviews, questionnaires, observations, and archives for example) and may also mix qualitative with quantitative data. My work is

clearly heavily reliant on interview data, but I also draw upon the other sources of evidence as cited by Yin. These are: documentation (such as previous and existing 360 degree reports and evaluations), archival records (such as the corporate history and articles in the media, which can give clues about corporate culture), and in some cases direct observation of the workplace and the informal questioning opportunities that this provides.

As a method for developing theory, Hammersley, Gomm and Foster (2000) report that some advocates use case-study work to produce theories, involving, according to Mitchell (1983) logical (rather than statistical) inference. Mitchell goes on to define a case-study as “*a detailed examination of an event (or series of related events) which the analyst believes exhibits (or exhibit) the operation of some identified theoretical principle*”. An important phrase in this statement is the operation of some identified theoretical principle since a purely narrative account would not itself constitute a case-study. Mitchell regards the case-study as heuristic: it reflects in the events described features which can be the results of underlying or general theoretical principles.

By defining each organisational setting as a separate case I am able to apply what Yin (2003) calls ‘explanation building’ as an analytic technique. Here the goal is to analyse the case-study by building an explanation about the case. In this way, it is similar to the hypothesis generating process of Glaser and Strauss (1967) described above under the heading of grounded theory. The combination allows a consideration of each case-study using grounded theory to generate descriptions of the main factors relating to that case. By then analysing the different cases by ‘between-case’ comparisons, either separate explanations or overarching explanations can be identified.

By selecting my cases from a population of large organisations from private, public and not-for-profit sectors I was able to take account, at least partially, of ‘environmental’ variation and reduce the variation due to size difference. The domain of my findings was thus defined as consisting of large organisations which operate in certain sectors.

The goal of relational sampling and then theoretical sampling is to choose cases to support or extend the emerging theory (in contrast to random statistical sampling). Given the limited number of cases which can feasibly be studied, cases should be selected that show extreme situations, so that the theory can be explored. In this research, because of the limited number of case-studies I was constrained to use, the relational and theoretical

sampling stages have been combined. The aim has been the same, which is to concentrate on the relevant coded data and to gather information to help construct theory.

Because case-study research deliberately examines any contradictions in the evidence as it accumulates, the process has the potential of generating theory with less researcher bias than theory built from incremental studies or through pure inductive reasoning. The empirical validity of the analysis is also more likely because of the close links between the theory and the evidence, which develops through the iterative and questioning steps of the process.

The danger with this type of analysis is the temptation to include all of the data in the theory, making it too detailed and lacking focus on what is most important. Parsimony is the aim. But there is also the danger of producing too narrow a theory that proves difficult to apply generally. In this thesis I try to achieve a balance between these risks, to produce a descriptive model that reflects the evidence I have analysed but avoiding the danger of assuming that the model is also predictive. Further studies would be required.

Generalisability is an arguable outcome of case-study research with some authors (such as Lincoln and Guba, 1995) suggesting that it is impossible but that ‘working hypotheses’ can be developed that can be used to understand other cases. This means that conclusions can be stated from studying one context that might hold in another context. Other authors (such as Gomm *et al*, 2002) suggest that generalisation, particularly within-case generalisation, is achievable, with the proviso that misleading conclusions about aggregates and trends from studying a few cases should be avoided. The theoretical sensitivity of Grounded Theory and the reflexivity of the researcher can, I believe, act to counter such errors.

To evaluate the method, Pfeffer and Pollack (1982) suggested that if the theory is:

- Parsimonious,
- Testable, and
- Logically coherent,

then it can be regarded as useful. In addition, the analytic procedure and the distinction between the theory and alternative explanations provide further criteria for assessment. And of course, the theory should provide new insights. There are arguments that the main task of case-study research is to develop and test theoretical ideas (e.g. Eckstein 1992; Mitchell, 1983). The distinction between social surveys and case-studies is often drawn.

Case-study is designed to draw inferences about general theoretical principles which the case is taken to exemplify, rather than a description representing a population. This is the definition of case-study research that I have applied throughout this thesis.

What would be the alternative research strategy to the case-study approach? Given the need to explore people's ideas and reactions, the interview method would always have been my preferred data collection method, but individual interviews could each have been treated as a case and analysed as such. Given the need to look at the setting of the application of 360°, since factors here may well explain success or failure of the method, then some clustering of cases under categories would be necessary. This could be considered a 'bottom-up' analysis, starting with the interviewee as the basic unit. The method I have actually adopted would then be 'top-down', with the setting being treated as a case. It would be interesting to compare these methods - as mentioned above, my reflexivity and awareness of context guided my interviewing technique and content, leading me to pursue issues *within* a case, rather than taking an independent and fresh start with each interview.

Because of this method of data collection, it is not possible to compare the data *a posteriori* - splitting up the existing data set into separate interview units and then analysing them each separately would not be taking into account the context and meaning originally derived. The process would have to be repeated with a different approach to each interview, perhaps mixing up settings in sequence - clearly an impossibility in practical terms.

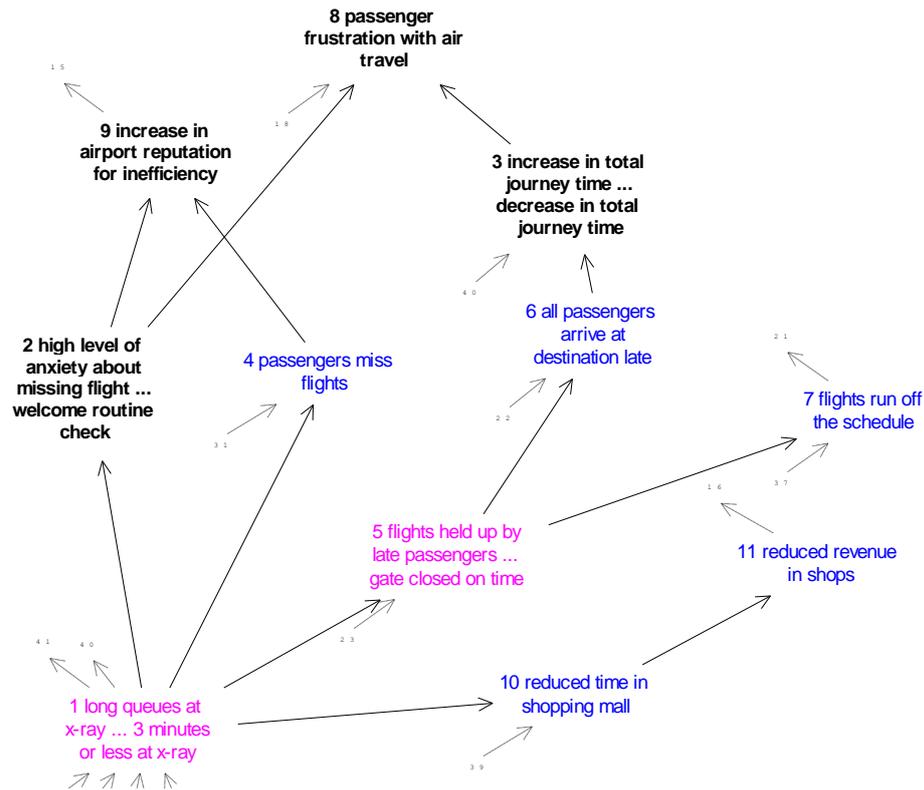
### **Sense-making and further analysis : a method based on Cognitive Mapping**

Although the coding and Case-study process generated a range of factors and provided a framework for the theory-building process, I found it useful to supplement the grounded theory approach by looking for causal relationships and displaying the data in the form of exploratory networks which could be examined visually. The process I used was based on 'cognitive mapping' and I applied this to the analysis of each of the case studies. I integrated this analysis closely with grounded theory so that it came to represent the 'theoretical sampling' stage described above.

Cognitive mapping is based on personal construct theory, developed by Kelly (1955)

To visualise and display the concepts derived from the grounded theory coding into an overall pattern, I based my method on the cognitive mapping technique suggested by Eden and Ackermann (1992). This technique is based on Kelly's idea of 'personal constructs'. The aim of the cognitive map is to display various concepts (generated by an individual or by a group – in this case by a group of individuals within a case interviewed separately) as a network, connected together by relationships. This gives a two dimensional diagram to work with, and it can also stimulate attempts at quantifying (approximately) the strengths of the various relationships. By arranging the various concepts hierarchically it is possible to identify possible causal relationships and explanations, or at least some possible interrelationships and clusters, aiding the 'theoretical sampling' process by suggesting directions for the analysis. It was the hierarchical arrangement of the data that I was interested in so that I could explore possible clustering of basic data categories into themes.

To illustrate the technique as used in its problem-solving mode, Figure 8 (below) provides an example of a cognitive map. It was used to explore the factors contributing to attitudes to security queues at airports and is shown in figure 8 below to illustrate the display format. My methodology is a much reduced form of the full cognitive mapping technique and looks only at basic data categories (issues or statements) and the themes that code them, along with possible clustering shown as relationships by means of arrows. The numbers in figure 8 refer to the order in which the items were originally listed and this is a method I do not use in my summaries: the temporal sequence within each interview is not useful for the analysis of my results.



**Figure 8 Example of a cognitive map.**

This kind of two-dimensional display can be manipulated further so that it becomes an analytical tool. The various themes laid out in the display are the main phrases that come out of interviews with people and the arrow heads in the diagram are there to show a proposed causal link between themes. In my research the direction of the arrows was determined by me, the researcher, and I have simplified the mapping process by not trying to apply cause-and-effect too rigorously (the maps I create in Chapter Four show relationships and possible groupings).

The mapping shown in the following Results section (Chapter Four) typically include the coded categories that describe salient issues (in terms of being strongly felt and shared by several interviewees) that arose from the interviews. These examples are used to form the bottom layer of the map. These issues and examples are then linked to categories in the upper layers, where they can be clustered into broader themes. The themes themselves can sometimes be divided into two layers: the middle layer is a group of ‘subcategories’ – broad themes which can themselves be subsumed by yet broader themes, which I have label as ‘major categories’.

The distinction between ‘themes’ and ‘issues’ is that the issues are examples from the raw data. Themes are constructs that I have used in order to collect together several issues with

similar properties. The mapping is not confined to linking issues into single themes only – some issues seem to contribute to more than one. Likewise, sub categories of themes can contribute to more than one major category by virtue of their properties. It is the major categories that I hope to extract from the interviews and use to build a theory for explaining why people should feel satisfied by their 360 degree feedback experiences.

An alternative use of the technique is to allow interviewees or focus groups to contribute their own views on the links but this was not used here on two grounds: first, time and availability of the interview subjects made this unfeasible, and second, I was attempting to apply my own consistent analytical viewpoint across a wide range of settings and felt that validation of my theory would be better tested by being able to look back at a set of maps that I had created myself.

The combination of grounded theory with cognitive mapping provides a multiple-method perspective for examining the theoretical frameworks being developed. I have found my method of using grounded theory coding first allows me to strip the ensuing cognitive map down to manageable proportions, given the purpose of distilling the themes into explanatory relationships. Feeding my interview data into the display stage of the mapping method was a useful combination for my specific purposes and this approach is described by Miles and Huberman (1994:137) as '*interrogating the text rather than the person*'.

By taking the results of the interviews (transcripts and coded sections) the maps represent my own, reflexive, view of the domain (the domain being the collective views of others about their experiences of 360 degree feedback). Cossette and Audet (1992), referring to the usual use of cognitive mapping, where people's views are taken into map form directly, emphasise the importance of the researcher in the process, where the resulting map as a product of the researcher's thinking as well as that of the subject.

To summarise, I have used the cognitive map process in a partial sense, mainly for its display qualities to assist in clarifying relationships. The complete and full analysis of the results meant using these mapped summaries in addition to examining the coded categories.

Where I have drawn maps of the various themes and issues in the Results Chapter, the various issues that comprise the lower levels of the map are not purely based on the

verbatim comments from the interviews. They certainly include issues that arose sometimes as specific comments. But there are others which are ideas that occurred to me as I analysed and sifted the data. Inclusion of issues in this way proved useful in allocating certain ideas to particular thematic codes. Those codes could then in turn be sifted and arranged hierarchically to extract meaning from the data in order to better explore reasons for particular reactions to 360 degree feedback.

### **3.12 Ethical considerations in the research design**

A useful code of ethics and conduct for interview-based methods such as this is that derived by the British Psychology Society (2006). The code has four principles, which I have adopted throughout this research. They are:

**Respect** for culture and role differences and for treating people fairly and by keeping records and gaining full consent for the interviews.

**Competence** by keeping within the bounds of my own knowledge and experience when discussing interview content with participants.

**Responsibility** for keeping records and eventual published reports anonymous.

**Integrity** through being honest and accurate in my transcriptions and reporting of interview comments and in declaring my own academic position and qualifications.

Respect and responsibility towards the participants were important principles to demonstrate through the preparation for, and conduct of, the interviews, along with assuring people of data security. For those interviews that were recorded, the facts that recording would take place and that the tapes would be deleted after the transcription were made clear and agreed beforehand. Note-taking was explained to all interviewees whether face to face or by phone.

Debriefing participants after the interview was included: a reminder that the information was only for this thesis and any follow-on publications and to answer any further questions.

Anonymity of organisations and individuals has been preserved throughout this thesis.

### **3.13 Summary of the methodology**

The research design and methods of analysis described in this Chapter consists of several components which share a consistent qualitative methodological perspective. The main data collection method is the semi-structured interview I employ to encourage each participant within a case to provide as much concrete detail of their experience as possible.

Case-study methodology is the focus of the analysis, using each organisational setting as a case study and using grounded theory as the qualitative approach to analysis, supplemented by a visual display of possible interactions in the form of two-dimensional cognitive maps.

The quality of this research design can be assessed using the four tests described by Kidder and Judd, 1986 (pp 26-29). The four tests are :

Construct Validity: establishing measures for the concepts being studied. Definitions and theoretical concepts from the literature review supplement the empirical observations and interpretations I have made.

Internal Validity establishing causal relationships where possible, so that concepts can be seen to be linked.

External Validity establishment of the domain to which the study's findings can be generalized. In this thesis that domain would be large organisations that use performance feedback processed.

Reliability demonstrating that the operations of the study can be repeated with the same results.

It is my contention that the research design I use for this research adopts these four principles in full.

### **3.14 An account of the fieldwork**

The participants were senior and middle managers. All were responsible either for departments (middle managers) or divisions (senior managers) and had been participants in

360 degree feedback programmes. I used critical incident interviews with all participants, either face to face (on the organisation's premises) or by telephone. Each interview lasted from 45 to 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for coding. There were 45 telephone interviews and 39 face-to-face interviews and the number of participating organisations was nine. The organisations came from different commercial sectors (retail, finance, charity, public sector and marketing) and apart from the Marketing Company, which was a SME, they were large national and international institutions. A summary of the organisations and the number and type of interviews carried out in each is shown in Table 2 below.

<b>Participating organisations and their 360 degree feedback environments and the reactions of participants</b>						
<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Sector</b>	<b>Instrument</b>	<b>Support</b>	<b>Number of interviewees</b>	<b>Telephone (T) or face to face (F) interview</b>
Occasional Development	Retailer	Private	Paper based	Review with boss	6	T
Coaching for development	Finance 1	Private	Online	Internal Coach	12	T
Career Development	Security company	Private	Online	Review with boss	10	F
Part of management development programme	Service Company	Private ex public	Online	External Facilitator	8	T
	Charity	Third sector	Offline	External Facilitator	3	T
Annual Appraisal	Marketing Company	Private	Online	Review with boss	8	T
Occasional Development	Mapping Agency	Public	Online	Review with boss	10	F
Part of management development programme	Finance 2	Private	Online	External Facilitator	19	F
	Local Authority	Public	Offline	External Facilitator	8	T
				<b>TOTAL N</b>	<b>84</b>	
				<b>SUBTOTAL T</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>T</b>
				<b>SUBTOTAL F</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>F</b>

**Table 2 The research interviews**

Table 2 summarises the participating organisations (described by their market sector), the uses to which 360 degree feedback is put, how people are supported throughout the 360 degree feedback process and the details of the interviews (number participating and whether it was face-to-face or by telephone). The order of the organisations in the table is ranked, according to criteria which are described in Chapter Five.

The organisations represent three economic sectors (public, private and third-sector). At the time of the interviews the organisations had the following total numbers of employees:

Security Company	55 000
Finance 1	25 000
Local Authority	25 000
Service Company	15 000
Retail	4 000
Mapping agency	1 600
Charity	1 500
Finance 2	1 000
Marketing Company	800

Also, at the time of the interviews, each organisation used one of two ways to collect ratings by questionnaire. Three of the nine organisations used paper-based questionnaires (completing them with a pen and sending their responses to a coordinator before processing). The remaining six organisations used an online, screen-based questionnaire which, on completion, was processed automatically by the 360 degree software system.

As part of each of the organisational 360 degree feedback programmes there was an element of support, which is also recorded in Table 2. In some, participants would have a review with their direct line manager ('boss' in Table 2). In others they would have the opportunity to discuss their resultant feedback with an internal coach or external facilitator.

The total number of interviews carried out within each organisation is also displayed in Table 2, as well as the form that the interview took (which was either by telephone or conducted face-to-face). The type of interview was dependent on the availability of the participant (through time available or distance away) but whether it was face-to-face or by telephone the same format of critical incident interviewing was followed. Telephone interviews were shorter, on average: telephone interviews times lasted approximately 45 minutes whereas face-to-face, being less formal, were generally twice that duration.

Anonymity of organisations and of the participating individuals has been preserved.

## Chapter Four      Results

A cautionary quote:

*One may say broadly that all the animals that have been carefully observed have behaved so as to conform to the philosophy in which the observer believed before his observations began.*

Bertrand Russell, 1927, *An Outline of Philosophy*

### 4.1 Introduction

The following chapter summarises the findings from each of the case-study organisations and records the themes that emerged from the interviews with participants. There are two main parts to the investigation:

- (1) A 'within-case study' analysis, which records and summarises findings from each case-study.
- (2) A 'between-case study' analysis, which compares and contrasts findings from the cases.

The presentation of the findings in section 4.5 consists of a summary of each case study. Each one includes an introductory background description of the organisation, based on internal and publicity documents, and discussions with managers. The introductory description is followed by a description of the fieldwork and then by some illustrative comments recorded during the interviews. These comments are not attributed to named or labelled individuals: they are intended to represent the type of comment used to build particular coded categories.

The description of each case study concludes with a list of the coded categories that emerged from within case-study analysis of that particular case, along with a definition of the category.

The result of these analyses is the development of a list of potentially important factors that are likely to influence people's reactions to their 360 degree experiences.

Each separate organisation provides a case study. The selection of cases was based on ease of access rather than a specific sampling procedure although I did try to collect data from

different economic sectors. Ease of access relates to permission to interview within an organisation and the availability of interviewees. This was not a probability-based procedure since the aim of this work was to build a working theory rather than to test one. My approach was based on realism and pragmatism. Further research can test the emerging theory and examine its transferability to other contexts and suggestions are made in the conclusions chapter.

The case-study research method described in Chapter Three was adopted and began with coding of all participants' transcripts within each case to draw up a list of themes. These themes were areas of the 360 degree feedback system, organisation or personal disposition that people regarded as being important determinants of their response to 360 degree feedback. The themes from *within* the case-study organisation were examined by using map displays (a form of cognitive mapping, described in Chapter Three) and further coding to identify possible causal relationships and factors which were common to more than one interviewee. The result of this analysis generated an overall list of factors for each case. This comprises Part 1 of this chapter.

By examining all the case-study results and maps it was possible to draw comparisons between all cases and see where factors occurred in more than one case and whether such common occurrences could be correlated with overall perceptions of 360 degree feedback. It was also possible to use these results and displays to identify differences between cases and again look for possible links with differences in people's perceptions. This between-case study analysis of the findings is described in Part 2 of this chapter.

## **4.2 Case-study results**

### **4.3 The settings : Participating Organisations**

The 84 interviewees were employed by 9 organisations representing different economic sectors and types. This was not intended to be a probabilistic sample for statistical analysis, it was intended to capture views on the 360 degree system when it is applied to different purposes, such as appraisal or succession, or for training.

The purpose to which the 360 degree feedback data is put varies. The spectrum extends from the semi-formal 'one-off' diagnostic check for personal development planning of one

or two managers at a time, to the very formal and strictly timetabled annual appraisal. Table 3 overleaf summarises these environments.

Table 3 lists the nine participating organisations in three clusters according to my assessment of the extent to which people (within a case-study) were satisfied with their experience of 360 degree feedback. This was possible through analysis of the overall impression that was conveyed through the interviews: an organisation that had provided a more satisfying 360 degree feedback experience, for example, could be identified because of the shared language or terminology that people used to describe their experiences – the language can have a positive ‘feel’ even when people criticise specific elements of their experience. On the other hand, critical or negative comments would be more prevalent in case-study organisations which did not provide such a conducive environment for 360 degree feedback.

The three clusters in Table 3 are colour coded Red (lowest), Amber, Green (highest) to distinguish between my assessments of satisfaction levels. In addition to the different reactions to 360 degree feedback, I found six different applications of the 360 degree system, which are also listed in Table 3, along with other details about number of participants, type of organisation and the method of interview.

/Continued overleaf

Rating	Purpose	Organisation	Sector	Instrument	Support	Number of interviewees	Telephone (T) or face to face (F) interview
Green	Occasional Development	Retailer	Private	Paper based	Review with boss	6	T
	Coaching for development	Finance 1	Private	Online	Internal Coach	12	T
	Career Development	Security company	Private	Online	Review with boss	10	F
<b>SUBTOTAL N</b>						<b>28</b>	
Amber	Part of management development programme	Service Company	Private ex public	Online	External Facilitator	8	T
		Charity	Third sector	Offline	External Facilitator	3	T
	Annual Appraisal	Marketing Company	Private	Online	Review with boss	8	T
<b>SUBTOTAL N</b>						<b>19</b>	
Red	Occasional Development	Mapping Agency	Public	Online	Review with boss	10	F
	Part of management development programme	Finance 2	Private	Online	External Facilitator	19	F
		Local Authority	Public	Offline	External Facilitator	8	T
<b>SUBTOTAL N</b>						<b>37</b>	
<b>TOTAL N</b>						<b>84</b>	
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>						<b>T</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>						<b>F</b>	<b>39</b>

Colour Key	
Green	Very positive
Amber	Positive with some reservations
Red	Less positive

**Table 3 Participating organisations and their 360 degree feedback environments and the reactions of participants**

### The use of Red, Amber and Green colour codes

I have used the Red/Amber/Green colour coding (RAG) as a simple rating system to distinguish between different responses to 360 degree feedback experiences by participants in different organisations. This also confirms that each organisation is being considered as a separate case.

RAG Rating is a common practice for project managers in organisations and is used for summarising issues or for status reports, based on the Red/Amber/Green colours in traffic

lights, to give a visual summary of progress (or risk) against targets. Here I use it to distinguish between the levels of satisfaction that I detected for organisations from the interview comments and context. It is a comparative scale: the three in the 'green category' were clearly positive overall with their evaluation of their 360 degree feedback experiences. Against this benchmark Amber classification represents those organisations where some ambivalence was detected. Those in the Red category had many complaints or criticisms which were not counterbalanced by many positive remarks.

I list and describe below the different applications of 360 degree feedback in the organisations I worked with. The order is alphabetical.

#### **4.4 The types of organisational application of 360 degree feedback examined by this study**

##### **Annual Appraisal**

In the literature and in my own experience, the use of 360 degree feedback as the main instrument of appraisal is unusual. In the one instance cited here a marketing organisation has undergone considerable growth recently and is making a transition from a family run business into more of a 'standard model'. Consequently new ideas are being generated and used in a pioneering way. The 360 degree feedback system was introduced even before training strategy had been determined.

The Marketing Company falls into this category.

##### **Career and Development Review**

These reviews are separate from the objective-setting and pay-related appraisal meetings, but they determine the activities and goals of people's development plans. The reviews are formal meetings, run along the same lines as appraisals, but with competency development being the main focus.

In this category I have placed the Security Company case.

### **Coaching for development**

Employers either use trained coaches or they train managers in coaching skills alongside a systematic use of 360 degree assessments throughout the organisation, with the results being used by managers and/or their coaches for ongoing development.

Finance Company 1 is in this category.

### **Management Development Programmes**

The 360 degree feedback report is provided to participants on development programmes to be introduced to the interpretation of the reports and their use during and after the event.

Finance Company 2, the Service Company, the Local Authority and the Charity use 360 degree feedback as part of their formal management development.

### **Occasional Promotion or development**

With this application, a decision is made (for a variety of reasons) that one or two managers need some feedback on their performance so that some improvement activity can be defined either before they are promoted or as part of their immediate development plan when given a new job.

When there is a round of vacancy filling, questionnaires are circulated, a report is generated and sent to the participant and his or her manager, who then arrange to meet to discuss the results and further action.

The Retailer is an established user of 360 degree feedback as part of their succession and promotion process. The Mapping Agency used 360 degree feedback as an *ad hoc* development tool, sometimes for identifying people for promotion and sometimes purely as a diagnostic tool for development planning.

## **4.5 RESULTS PART ONE: Within-case analysis**

The results of the research are given below for each organisation (case). The studies are grouped according to the organisational application of 360 degree feedback. Descriptions of the results for each case vary in detail and depth. The interviews within each setting varied in the amount of engagement with participants or the time available. Standardising

the interviews proved more difficult than I anticipated – with some of the cases, people had time and enthusiasm for participating in the interviews. In others time-pressure and a lack of interest seemed to affect engagement.

## **PURPOSE: FOR ANNUAL APPRAISAL**

### **Case-study 1 The Marketing Company**

The Marketing Company has seen significant growth in revenue in recent years and has won Field Marketing Agency of the Year award from Marketing magazine. Business development activity has created a number of business units within the overall Marketing Company Group and this organisational development has generated a number of initiatives for the appraisal and development of people. The total number of employees was 800.

Staff and managers have been introduced to an online 360 degree feedback method of annual appraisal, which provides a full profile of strengths and development needs expressed in competency terms. The introduction was relatively sudden, involving little consultation and no tailoring of the competency framework. Briefings for appraisees were via email messages with an attachment containing the instructions for logging on. People were reminded (via email) a month before their annual appraisal meeting that they should start their 360 degree feedback by logging on and circulating an internet link to their raters. On completion of the questionnaires, users can download a pdf file of their report which they can save to disk and print out. This forms the basis of their preparation for the appraisal meeting. The report also contains explanatory notes and guidance on interpretation. There are charts, tables and narrative comments for people to absorb.

### **Fieldwork**

Ten telephone interviews were conducted with people who had volunteered to take part. This is equivalent to about 30% of the total population of users. Each interview lasted about 15 minutes and used open ended questions to gauge people's feelings about the system.

After an initial email to make contact, respondents were asked about:

- the context of the 360 feedback they went through - its application, the follow-up meeting etc.
- the most fulfilling part of the experience, and the least, and how they felt about these
- how the feedback was used (if applicable) and what they may do differently as a result
- if anything surprised them about the experience. Or disappoint
- any other areas that they feel are significant.

This was the pattern of questioning I used for subsequent telephone interviews with people from other organisations.

The interview notes were transcribed and then coded into specific categories of factors. These factors are the emerging main areas that I felt had an impact on the success of 360 degree systems.

The fact that this mode of use of 360 degree feedback was for annual appraisal meant that a discussion of the results with the boss was mandatory. As described below, people felt that more information and consultation should have been available before the programme was launched and that more support for development was needed. Even though managers were automatically involved in the process, they themselves received no training or support and nearly all were as new to the process as their juniors were.

The results identify greatest strength of feeling (as expressed either as direct comments or assessed through the attitude and intensity of the interviewee during the interview) in the following areas:

- Levels of support
- Ongoing development and Learning
- Relationship building

These headings are my initial coding categories for the analysis of all the cases. They are not at this stage linked to any theoretical framework, being empirically derived through the Grounded Theory method I adopted.

Addressing these areas, it was felt by participants, would enhance the existing system and add value to the performance management of the Marketing Company staff generally. These areas emerged from the interviews and were identified firstly through grounded theory coding and then distilled into its main themes by cognitive mapping. Further details of these processes are described below.

### **Preliminary results**

Each of the categories I perceived to be the most significant (through the analysis of my recordings and tapes) are summarised below with examples of the interviewees' comments that guided my categorisation.

#### **Level of Support**

This includes feelings about the need for formal briefings:

*“ people didn't really know how to fill in the forms on me, I would have preferred to be in a cascade of briefings and been able to explain ”,*

and

*“ Raters need educating in the use of ‘not-applicable’ and understanding how the questions link to my job. I could rely on some of the ratings but I knew others had simply used ‘3’s because they weren’t sure”*

The importance of this to the system is that the reliability of ratings may be doubtful if raters interpret questions differently. Also, confusion about process can lead to resistance towards the system as a whole.

Another category is around the support for interpretation and application of the results. There are varying levels of support from managers and many respondents appear to rely entirely on their own self-motivation and commitment for designing and keeping to development plans. Those who are naturally disposed to develop themselves will take more from this than those who feel under more operational pressure. Examples of comments extend from those who suggest that they felt unsupported:

*“I had to wade through the report and work out for myself that the scatter chart was a useful development planner. I've set some objectives but only things I can do easily - the things that were bigger I don't think I can tackle”,*

.... to a more balanced and planned approach:

*“I’ll look to my boss for help and support on some of the broader things and carry on with some of the points myself when I see opportunities at work”.*

### **Self-development and learning**

People’s response to the feedback varied. No two interviewees shared the same approach to ongoing development. Some used the appraisal meeting to discuss results thoroughly, but not everyone concentrated on the 360 degree results or on development. Some had not yet met their managers and others had pressure of work as a reason for not following the improvement plans. Despite this, all respondents said how they would value advice on further development around the competencies. Field workers in particular felt that they needed help and guidance.

Some people are independent and motivated in self-managed learning. For example:

*“I liked getting the report and interpreting it myself. I use it extensively and take it to work to consult from time to time, looking for ways of improving”, and:*

*“I bullet-pointed all my main points and went through them all to identify gaps and concentrate on the poorer areas”.*

Others would be more reliant on external advice, making comments such as *“There is a need to formalise the PDPs and to review progress”* and *“You probably need to set aside half a day to cover this with your manager and work out what to do with the results.”*

There was an overall tendency for people’s development commitment to wane after the appraisal meeting and for development objectives to be put to one side.

### **Building relationships**

At its best, 360 degree development can improve and sustain working relationships between the person being rated and his or her team, and also with the boss (Atwater *et al*, 2002). Most interviewees acknowledged this but most felt that there were minor obstacles with the current system.

A variety of these obstacles emerged, such as evidenced by:

*“ Everyone thought the results would be anonymous but my manager was easily identified and some of those categories with only two people let you know who was who. That meant people were surprised .... quite shocked ....”.*

and

*“I only used some people in my team, not all, which made some feel excluded. It makes it difficult then to sit down with the team to go through it all.”*

Other comments were along similar issues:

*“Managers need training in understanding the process and in running the meeting”*

*“ Not all levels of management are going through this (360 degree) process and that doesn't give you much confidence ”*

*“I got some low ratings from my manager and no narrative comments but on a day-to-day basis she has given me good feedback”* (receiving this contrasting feedback is potentially confusing and can erode trust)

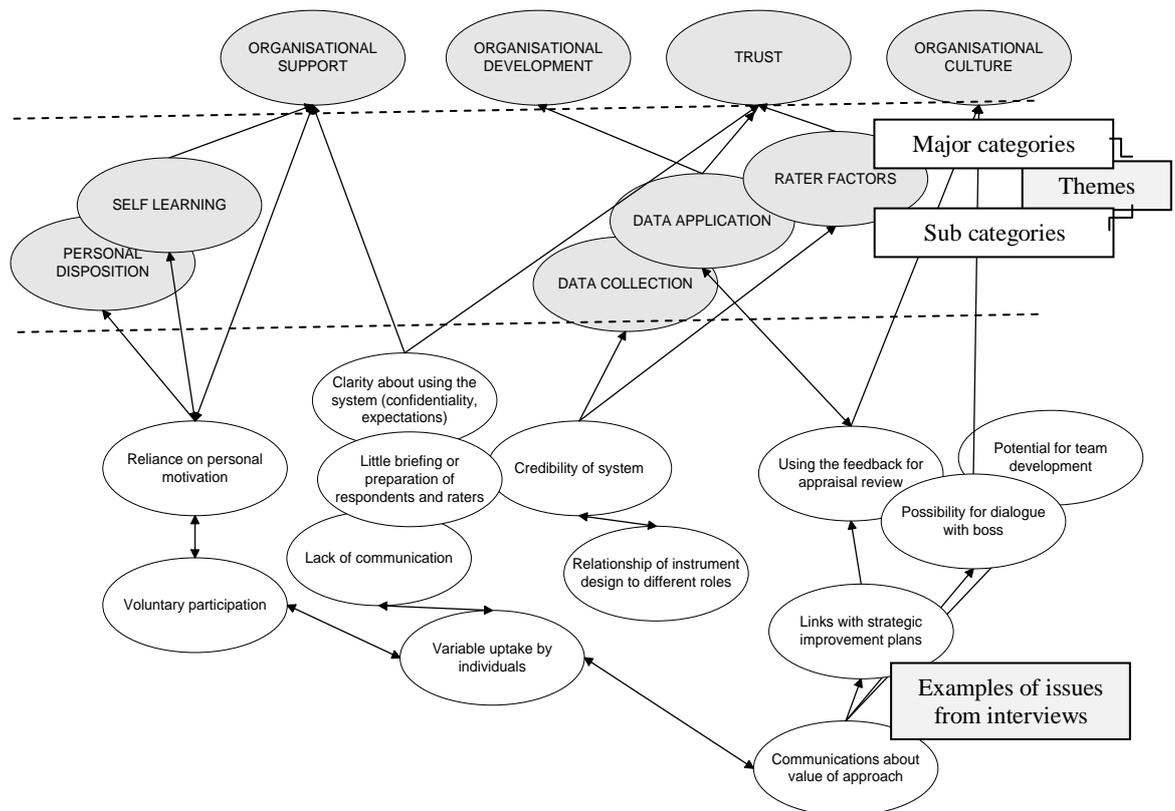
On the positive side everybody felt that a properly structured approach to 360 degree feedback would be beneficial. Suggestions were mostly around giving more guidance to managers on how they should run the feedback/appraisal meetings. Setting up a semi-formal coaching network was also mentioned.

Many people mentioned the fact that a comprehensive 360 degree report forms an excellent basis for a constructive, two-way discussion, not only for an appraisal but also for ongoing dialogue with the boss. It was also suggested that team relationships would improve if the feedback was shared back and used for team development. This is currently a patchy and inconsistent practice in the company but one which most people would like to see more of.

Analysis of the interview data and coding categories, assisted visually by mapping out the various factors two dimensionally, suggested several interactions. Communication and support, for example, seem to have great influence on the working relationships between participants and their bosses, which in turn had a positive effect on the further support for development that people needed. A positive feedback loop seemed to occur when these components were felt to be present. The mapping outline is shown in Figure 9 below. As described earlier the mapping process used to create Figure 9 sets out the salient issues (in terms of being strongly felt and shared by several interviewees) that arose from the interviews. These examples form the bottom layer of the map. Those issues and examples are then linked to the upper layers, where they can be clustered into broader themes. The themes themselves can be divided into two layers: the middle layer is a group of

subcategories – broad themes which can themselves be subsumed by broader themes, which I have labelled as major categories.

The distinction between ‘themes’ and ‘issues’ is that the issues are examples from the raw data. Themes are constructs that I have used in order to collect together several issues with similar properties. The mapping is not confined to linking issues into single themes only – some issues seem to contribute to more than one. Likewise, sub categories of themes can contribute to more than one major category by virtue of their properties. Here is Figure 9.



**Figure 9 Map of relationships between perceived issues with Marketing Company participants.**

The voluntary status of the feedback programme, despite being a part of the annual appraisal system, gave some people an opportunity to miss out the 360 degree component. This may reflect a more casual approach to formal appraisal anyway (this is a company in transition from a small, family run business into one which relies more on ‘systems’). Or it may be a reflection of business priorities. A project-management element of the 360 degree feedback programme was missing at the Marketing Company: there was no face to face briefing or opportunity for discussion. All communication went out prior to the start of the programme by email. The reliance on self-motivation and understanding was consequently

high, which suggests that participants who found the process helpful were those with a positive disposition towards feedback and development.

The results suggest that organisational culture and strategic direction are entwined with the need for effective working relationships and trust if further personal development is to succeed. The role of the participant's boss in bridging these areas will be significant, and this influence will in turn be affected by the quality of the communication and support that is made available. A poor relationship between participant and boss can lead to the wastage of investment described above - poor take-up rates and low levels of development activity. Clarity of roles within the feedback system is apparently important and communication is a fundamental enabler of this, initiating a chain of subsequent benefits.

## **PURPOSE: FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT**

### **Case-study 2 The Security Company**

This part of my research was carried out at the headquarters of this international security firm, which uses the technique as a preparatory exercise for an annual appraisal meeting known within the organisation as a 'Career and Development Review'. This is intended to stand apart from the usual annual appraisal, where previously agreed objectives are looked at and where performance related pay enters the process. The idea of the career review meeting is to discuss fundamental personal development using as much contextual information as possible. The 360 degree feedback report is one strand of this information and the results are known beforehand by the two people at the meeting: a manager and his or her boss.

The 360 degree data is collected by an online questionnaire. People are given a date for their review meeting and reminded that they need to bring along a copy of their 360 degree feedback. People log on to the system and complete a self-rating questionnaire. They then email a confidential link to those people they want ratings from (peers, direct reports, manager, customers) and wait for the responses to come in (they have access to a 'monitor screen' to check on who has responded, but with no view of the completed questionnaires). Once they have enough responses, they get the system to email them their report. They take along to the meeting a copy for their manager as well.

## **Fieldwork**

I arranged ten interviews with the help of a previous Security Company client contact who was interested in evaluating the 360 degree method and who had responsibility for management development. This contact selected the interviewees based on his knowledge of their experience and interest. I had no complaints about this – getting interviews in organisations, especially with the more influential managerial levels, has generally proven to be difficult, even with people who are genuinely interested.

I spent three (non-consecutive) days at the main office, conducting three two hour interviews there on each day, each one in the setting of the interviewee's own office. These interviewees were all interested in, and supportive of, the 360 degree method as an organisational appraisal method and were happy to devote the time to discussing their experiences with me.

As a way of 'closing' the process for the participants, I produced an overall summary of the results of the interviews, where I distilled the main themes and listed them, pointing out the implications of some of them. In addition, I presented each interviewee with an internet link to an online survey questionnaire. This provided the list of factors from the report mentioned above as items to be rated in terms of perceived importance. There was also space for additional comments. The aim of this was to provide some validation of my initial findings and to collect some further thoughts from people after they had had time to reflect on their interview and also on the group summary. The use of the document and the survey also provided a vehicle for validation, giving participants the opportunity to check over the findings and mention any discrepancies to me. This did not happen.

In the previous case study (case study 1), 360 degree feedback was felt to play a significant part in improving the quality of the performance review discussion and interviewees also felt that this could form a useful addition to the appraisal process if supported by some practical enhancements around communication and training of managers in giving feedback. What has not been established though is whether the same response between participant and boss would be achieved at different authority levels. This sample was limited to a senior management group and they were confident and possibly felt less threatened by using 360 degree feedback within the annual appraisal.

## **Preliminary results**

The interviews generated many shared opinions and feelings about experiences of 360 degree feedback. People had views about the data collection system itself, which I have initially clustered together under a heading called 'External Factors'. This cluster includes the mechanism and organisational framework of the 360 degree system. I chose the working title of 'Personal Factors' for all the other ideas – all of them concerned with the attitudes and disposition of the interviewee. The statements that people made could be positive or negative – this would not affect the clustering of the emerging themes. Clusters contain positive and negative comments about a particular theme.

All of the interviewees expressed overall satisfaction with the feedback system. People saw the system as a contributor to the 'performance management' process within the company and as a way of capturing and using information that would otherwise be done only at managers' discretion.

The thematic codes I used to cluster people's comments when analysing the Security Company interviews were:

- Support
- Self development and learning
- Disposition to feedback
- Previous exposure to 360 degree feedback
- Trust
- Relationships with co-workers
- Rater factors
- Data collection
- Purpose
- Organisation Development
- Organisational Culture

The first two thematic codes, 'Support' and 'Self development and learning' were also seen with the Marketing Company case-study.

**Support** refers to the help given to users of the system in order for the process to work.

This theme includes aspects such as:

*‘The people who are skilled tend to use it best but they are the people who need it least. So you get two poles of feed back: one very positive from the skilled and experienced and the other at the other end’,*

This suggests that the system requires a threshold level of support and education if it is to be relied upon as a source of valid feedback.

This is a project management domain and includes briefing and preparation. Given the scale of investment in such a system (time and effort as well as money), leaving out this rudimentary area adds unnecessary risk. But the person with overall responsibility for the 360 degree feedback system and its use was adamant that only people who fitted what he perceived to be the Security Company culture of self reliance would be employed by the organisation. He went on to say that it is important getting managers trained in not only use of the system (how many raters to get feedback from, for example) but also in basic feedback and interpretative skills, and despite this he also said *‘they should be able to work it out for themselves’* and he appeared resolute in holding this rather contradictory opinion. The majority of users did not concur with his *‘learn as you go’* approach. It may be that the success or failure of a 360 degree system, at least at the outset, hinges upon the assumptions of very few, but influential, people. Their assumptions may be based on strength of belief rather than awareness of the issues that make the difference to 360 degree implementation and management.

**Self development and learning** is a concept which comes closest to the suggested benefit of appraisal for individuals. For example: *“In terms of relativity [sic] I can pick out things which support my own view of things I need to focus on”*, and *“It gets people to think about their behavioural skills – the impact they are having on their team, as opposed to objectives”*

We can perhaps regard this as the individual and personality-related aspect of development planning and its contribution to performance improvement.

**Disposition to feedback**, which was described by people in terms of their attitude or the disposition they observed in their co-workers when they went through the same 360 degree process. Examples include *“Once they are over the initial hurdle it is OK, some people find*

*it nerve-racking or scary”, and “If you are able to pick up the good or the bad out of the data then you can always learn and get better”*

**Previous experience of the 360 method** is a basic concept and describes how familiar people were with the method before they experienced it at the Security Company.

Experiences ranged from: *“This was my first time through it, about three weeks ago I was given the pack on the 360, and my review was only last week”* and, relating to a review meeting with a boss: *“the first session was the most difficult, because we were both new to the process”*

to: *“When I got my report I then took out the old report for cross comparison”*

**Relationships with co-workers** were mentioned many times (during the course of 9 interviews) and was the most numerous theme to emerge, perhaps because of its breadth of definition as much as because of its importance. Comments here ranged from the relatively superficial but practical, such as how long a rater had known someone else, to concerns over the nature of the relationship, such as:

*“I was particularly keen to get particular people that I had in mind because I wanted them to be part of the feedback process and “by choosing difficult people you’re almost sending a message to them saying I value your opinion”*

There were also suggestions which appeared to be of value to maintaining and building relationships but which were actually about exploiting people’s perspectives and knowledge and about the resolving power about the method: *“I feel it is important to talk to the people who gave me their feedback, the problem is this is time consuming, but something maybe lost by the consolidation process”*

Concern was also expressed by one person about how the feedback may be misinterpreted if people do not have access to a supporting relationship, and how this could then affect working relationships locally: *“Think of somebody in a branch environment. If the report was not as they expected would it influence the relationship they have with those people”* (their raters), but this was a hypothesised concern not based on actual personal experience.

**Trust** seemed to be a factor that people found significant. By this they meant the confidentiality and objectivity of the process. An example of a negative statement about this theme was: *“One of her colleagues - an IT Director- picked only three others, which meant he could tell who said what”* (talking about another 360 degree participant’s approach).

And there was a link in some people's minds with the broader organisation systems, evidenced through comments like: "*Links with HR systems means there is slight suspicion*". And: "*Although in the later stages there was a 100% compliance she felt that there was not a 100% buy in*"

In general, the tone of people's comments suggested varying degrees of concern. The nearest comment to a positive view was: "*She will use some of the information with her team and show that she is only picking up what they are saying and using it.*"

The concept of trust is connected with broader issues of organisational culture and behaviour and also to attitudes towards appraisal in general. I should note here also that the comments were predominantly observations on *others'* approaches to receiving 360 degree feedback.

The External Factors mentioned at the beginning of this section were those that reflect the 'framework' or organisational setting of the 360 degree feedback system. These were listed under the following headings:

'**Rater factors**' is a label I gave to a number of statements that referred to the knowledge raters have about the performance of the subject of the 360 degree survey. This opens up an area which includes a perception of 'fairness', as with one person who said: "*Some people select feedback from those who they get on with, there need to be best practice guidelines*", and with another: "*She gave me good ratings, but is the lack of confidentiality the reason?*"

**Data collection** refers to the mechanism that people interacted with in order to supply the feedback, so many of the comments in this domain are connected with ease of access to the system and administrative matters. Examples of points that were made in this area are:

*"The technology makes it painless, sophisticated, slick, easy to use, these are important things in the Security Company"*

and perhaps more critically:

*"There was a gap between filling in the forms and the actual review and things have changed since so I would rank myself differently now."*

So turnaround and action based on the feedback needs to happen within a reasonable time.

But there were also comments that suggested that people being rated were also highly aware of the subjective use of the rating scale by some people:

*“So all this report is based on their interpretation of the rating scale, so you have to read between the lines a bit”*

**‘Purpose’** is the label describing the organisational use of the data from the system as well as the use to which (a subset of) it is put by individuals. For example statements like: *“It is a learning experience anyway, but since it is linked to a career review it is very important”* occurred several times, suggesting that the dual purpose of the system was understood despite not being made explicit to users by the organisation.

The value of having data to help with career development was also acknowledged:

*“You have stages of life etc and this is trying to pick up on a point in time in career”*

As well as the perhaps unseen and unmeasured value to the organisation of such feedback, as evidenced by this comment: *“(The Security Company)... has lost people without knowing what their aspirations were”*

**Organisation development** is a heading to cover the way in which the system aids the business by developing its people. For example, one participant reported:

*“I admire the implantation of the whole thing because it has been without debate”.*

This suggests that the investment in introducing and maintaining this appraisal method requires organisational effort and sensitive handling, in turn indicating that there would be considerable business benefits linked to its successful implementation.

Also, the culture of the company does not easily embrace such initiatives:

*“It is quite a step to get hard-nosed operational people on board”*

Some people seem aware of the need for constant monitoring and review if the 360 degree system is to survive. For example, one manager said:

*“I worry about the fading away of initiatives - things need embedding and sticking with. Further into the organisation there is more onus on middle managers who are pressured and so on and less enthusiastic in devoting time. This process needs to be a performance objective to get the process working.”*

Another manager suggested:

*“It must be a support mechanism, open and honest feedback and day to day working and not used as the annual tool”*

### **Organisational culture factors.**

In my initial coding exercise I had felt that organisational culture may itself be a factor. It turned out that relatively few statements fell naturally into this category, so my assumptions have since been revised. But there were some comments which can only be put into this separate category. Comments such as:

*“The culture in the Security Company is very operationally focused as a business”,*

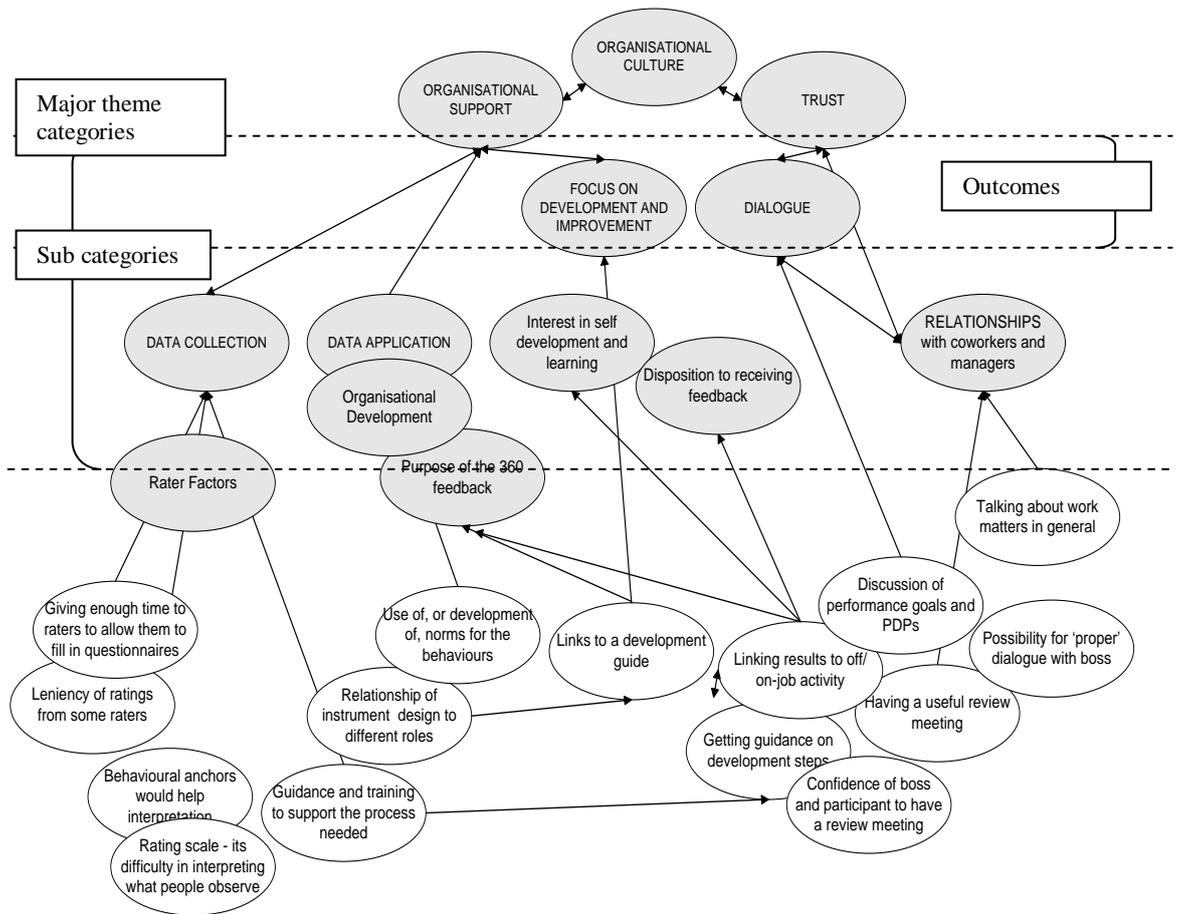
and from another angle, suggesting that culture can change:

*“The use of this approach can alter accepted norms and perceptions of management and what is important”.*

Also, the manager in charge of the entire career development system reinforced his comments about self-reliance being adequate for effective implementation with: *“The ethos in (the Security Company) is not to spoon-feed.”*

### **Synopsis of the Security Company results**

I used a two-dimensional mapping exercise of the various concepts to help visualise the results and to examine the possibility that the themes had a hierarchical relationship, where some themes could be clustered together and subsumed by broader categories. The range of concepts I used to categorise the views and feelings of the interviewees are mapped out in figure 10 below.



**Figure 10** Map showing possible relationships between the Security Company interview themes

Having examined the concepts, placing them into possible hierarchies and, checking back against my memos and research notes, I was able to produce, in figure 10, a diagram, following the advice of Wolcott (1990) to ‘*get rid of most of the data you accumulate*’ in order to remain focused on the essence of the research question. By focusing on the relationships between the themes I have created the hierarchy shown in Figure 10. Here the major categories are placed above two layers of sub-category: this is because the analysis produced what I perceived to be people’s views about the two main outcomes or ‘goals’ of a successful 360 degree feedback system in the Security Company:

- (1) *the creation of effective and constructive dialogue between a participant and his or her boss, and*
- (2) *the use of the dialogue and relationship to design a performance improvement and personal development plan.*

These outcomes provide the stimulus for people’s perception about the organisational culture factors of support and trust. The concept of ‘support’ and ‘trust’ are properties of

the organisation and are shown as the major categories of Figure 10. They enable the provision of the two outcomes.

I should stress here that, on the basis of this sample of interviews, there was no suggestion that the development plan had to be closely linked to the actual results of the 360 degree feedback report. The outcome merely suggests that a plan is developed and is done more effectively after a review meeting that used the 360 degree results as a basis for discussion. The discussion did not necessarily need to follow directly from the 360 degree results. So the specific information created by the 360 degree feedback is here less important than the fact that the feedback process generates the need for a review meeting which then provides the environment for a useful discussion.

The capacity of people's bosses to develop the right conditions for the dialogue to happen was considered important, the most positive comments coming from those who felt that their working relationships and discussions acted as a catalyst for subsequent development and work planning. Thus there is reliance on the ability of a participant's manager to facilitate the review meetings, yet at the Security Company no training or analysis of training need is provided. The ethos of 'not being spoon-fed' prevails.

### **Post-interview data from the Security Company interviewees**

After the interviews I produced a summary report for circulation amongst the contributors. This summarised all of the seemingly important factors I had identified and pointed out some possible implications. A copy of this report is in Appendix 2. In addition I created an online questionnaire asking participants to rate each of the (23) factors I had identified in terms of 'importance' so that I could see how these factors, described now in my terminology, related to their perceptions. I also asked for comments and further suggestions.

The results of the survey (n=9) appear to confirm the importance of the 'focus on personal development' and a 'focus on performance improvement' in people's minds. The idea that these two outcomes are regarded as important is not surprising, but the interview data suggests that the way in which people are expected to have these mind-sets and to go about following up is influenced by the prevailing organisational culture. This emerging hint at the interplay between 'feedback orientation' and 'feedback culture' was pursued in

subsequent interviews and analyses and will form the basis of the theory described in the discussion in Chapter 5.

At the Security Company, the value of the 360 degree feedback process is in talking with one's boss generally rather than specifically it seems, suggesting that the detail of the 360 degree feedback provides a solid framework which may or may not be fully exploited.

## **PURPOSE: COACHING FOR DEVELOPMENT**

### **Case-study 3 Finance Company 1**

Finance company 1 is a banking and financial services organisation. It operates principally in the UK and Ireland and the USA. It employs more than 24,000 people worldwide in more than 750 offices.

360 degree feedback had been used for two years at the time of this study. It had been used so that the results could feed into a coaching scheme which involved a mixture of internal and external facilitators. Although this was the intended purpose, the strategy was unfolding over a long period (rather than being announced to all and implemented as an initiative). Consequently there has been patchy take-up across the organisation (some people have used the approach and others not). Also, unusually for 360 degree feedback projects, several suppliers have been used at the same time, with different instruments, and because of the lack of universal access to the internet, a mix of paper and online questionnaires were used.

Coaching of managers is the aim of the programme and the 360 degree feedback provides a diagnostic instrument with line managers or external facilitators using the report as a basis for coaching. There were different perceptions of the process depending on whether coaching was from the line manager or from an external coach. In addition, there was a strong controlling influence from the HR department which is in turn made up of several sub-functions which are responsible for supporting different sections of the business. Decision-making on overall strategy for performance management and coaching therefore depends on the perceived needs of the business through each of these perspectives, hence the mix of suppliers and the variable application of 360 degree feedback.

## **Fieldwork**

Telephone interviewing was used to collect the data. Within this case-study there were differences in the experiences that participants had of 360 degree feedback. Two distinct groups were interviewed, differing in the obstacles they faced in completing questionnaires and receiving reports. One group (of eight participants) went through the 360 degree feedback and coaching follow-up processes without any hitches in the administration of the system. Another group (of nine participants) suffered delays and difficulties because of a perceived low service level from the service supplier. The supplier was the same for both groups. Difficulties experienced by the second group were:

- delays in system response,
- receiving report files via email which would not open,
- misspellings of names on reports, and
- waiting times of up to two months from the time of logging on for receipt of reports.

Although delays can often be caused by slow responses from other raters, these are not considered by participants to be faults in the 360 degree feedback system itself. The difficulties experienced by Finance Company 1 group were attributed to the 360 degree data collection process. This seems to be a 'hygiene factor'. When it works people hardly notice it but an effect of a perceived poor performance in several 'hygiene factors' is that it leads to a poor perception of the entire feedback *and* development experience.

## **Results**

People's experiences of the process were polarised according to which of the subgroups they were in. One group expressed generally positive feelings, but dissatisfaction was expressed with some of the 'hygiene factors' by the other study group. For this second group access to the interface, design of reports, response rates by raters, turnaround time, and the nature of questionnaire items all receive critical feedback, but people in both groups generally accept the validity of their feedback and aim to use it in development planning.

The significant themes that I extracted out of the Finance Company 1 interviews were present also in the first two case studies. They were:

- Relationships
- Self-directed learning
- Purpose
- Data Collection

### **Data Collection**

People who had problems with the administration of the system made comments such as:

*“Reports took over four weeks to get back, that’s a major turnoff ... we lose momentum”*

and

*“The report file was corrupt and I couldn’t open it for two weeks ... I had to get (Finance Company 1) IT help in the end”*

Most comments from this dissatisfied group were factual descriptions of problems experienced. Overall perception of the system was negative as a result, despite having the same support and coaching framework as the rest of the users in Finance Company 1. The hygiene factors in this instance were summed up under the heading “customer service” by these participants, who felt disappointed that a promising method had been hindered in this way. The point about ‘lost momentum’ cited above was made by several people.

Common to both groups, bureaucratic processes through extensive HR involvement seems to blur the focus of the system and to dilute the responsibility for engaging with the system. The control of the system (through project management) is through the HR department and external providers and not with line managers, so local or individual follow-ups and team applications appear to be difficult to organise. On the other hand the benefit for the HR function is that centralised control allows them to use a financial cost-benefit evaluation tool.

### **Relationships**

Some people had feedback meetings with their boss, others with an external facilitator or coach. The full synergy of factor interaction in 360 degree systems is difficult to achieve in this setting. Whilst ongoing support through the coaching mechanism will allow people to use the method to identify development requirements and select appropriate solutions

through corporate development resources, unless the boss also takes on the role of coach there is less impact on the relationship between manager and boss or on the strategic development of the business (Becker and Klimoski, 1989). In those circumstances where bosses had coaching roles there was greater approval by users, although with the proviso that they have the appropriate skills, for example: “...no problems with having my boss as coach, but it would depend on their effectiveness in this role”.

Once a person's boss takes on the coaching role, the relationship-building element was felt to be important, one comment being: “...no problem with my boss as coach, but it needs a level of openness from both parties” and another participant develops this idea with:

*“ The advantages of having your boss as coach, like better understanding of work issues, outweigh the disadvantages, like discussing personal weaknesses or the fact that she's not a 'professional' coach. But as long as there's a good level of trust it should work.”*

HR managers tend to have a close and direct influence on the use of 360 degree feedback at Finance Company 1. This means that the method is seen as being ‘done to people’ rather than being owned by them. For line managers and staff to feel that they own the process they simply need to be able to decide how and when they use it. Development related more closely to local needs will require better preparation by managers' bosses. They would need confidence in interpreting and discussing feedback and perhaps working with colleagues to look at overall trends on a regional or functional basis.

The obstacle to the transfer of control is that business priorities can easily deflect attention from the development process – these take priority over the coaching programme. This means that for it to be successful, attitudes towards the 360 degree process must be positive enough to override this tendency. The coaching and development need to be seen as important business tools in themselves. This can be reinforced with the aid of HR systems such as the performance management framework, where managers' performance is assessed not only against business objectives but also against development activity. This is perhaps where the influence of the HR function is better focused, one step removed from the daily management of the feedback and coaching process. Comments arose such as: “Can this be rolled into the performance review?” and “ It's four months since our last discussion and I could do with more continuity and informal meetings or support. The coaching seems to have been decoupled from the direction my work is taking me”

This kind of perception suggests that integration of the 360 feedback coaching process with general performance management would give the continuity and face validity that users seem to need if they are to build the relationships and follow through on longer term development plans.

### **Self-directed learning**

When people wanted to use 360 degree feedback for this purpose it came across in the general language they used and their openness to receiving perhaps unexpected information. Comments such as these were made:

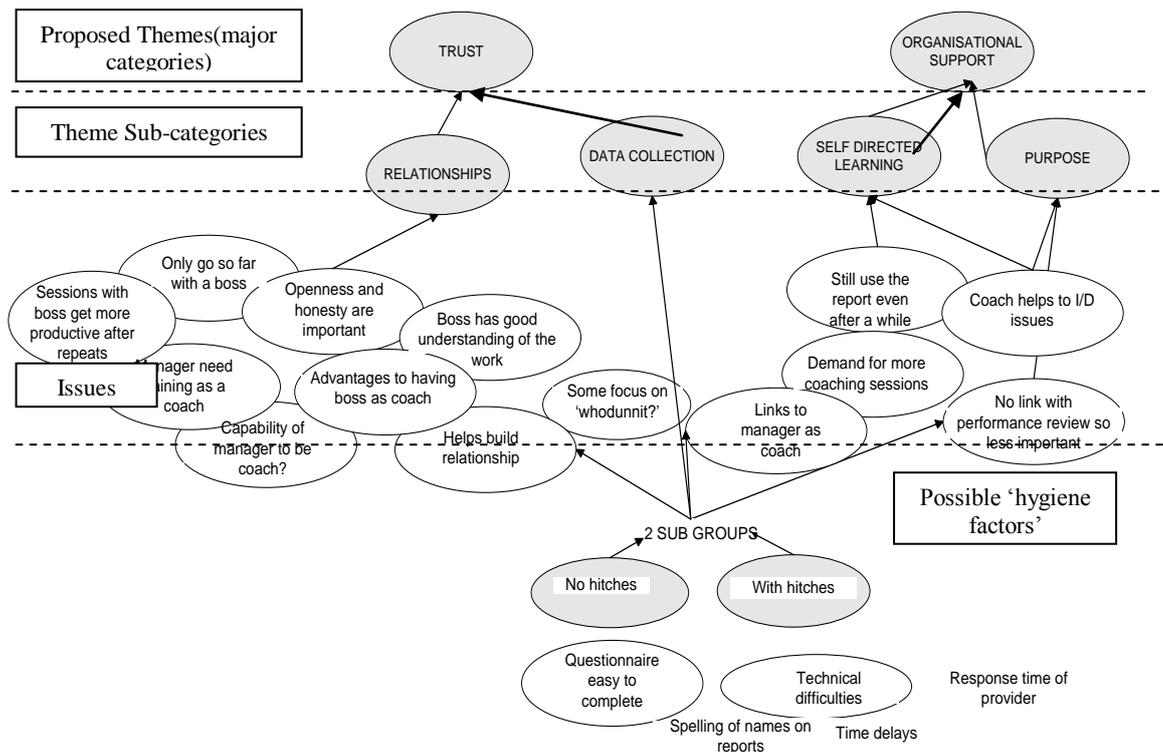
*“It identified some areas to improve which I thought, assumed, were OK – helpful.*

*Something to go on which I hadn’t thought there”*

*“The report gives useful structure to look at areas to improve”*

*“The points came across well and I wanted to learn from them”*

People also reported keeping hold of the reports for use later on, for as yet unidentified development. There was also considerable interest in the idea of being coached through development plans, either with the manager or with an external coach. A mapping of the interview codes and transcripts plus some of my own observations from both subgroups is shown in figure 11 below.



**Figure 11 Map of main themes from the Finance Company 1 data**

Organisational support and Trust are the main themes that emerge from this case as they appeared to be considered as important cultural dimensions by the participants, a backdrop to the other issues which were discussed.

During the interviews there was little explicit, direct mention of Support or Trust, although examination of the possible relationships between themes by the mapping visualisation and further examination of transcripts suggests that these factors do explain the responses to 360 degree feedback by Finance Company 1 participants. The theme of ‘relationships’ for example, is an aspect of organisational support. I have included them as ‘major categories’ and include them as a top layer of the map.

**PURPOSE: MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME**

**Case-study 4 Local Authority**

Here the 360 degree feedback was linked to a leadership programme which used Learning Sets as the main developmental method. Learning sets are adaptations of Action Learning (Pedler, 1997).

According to the experiences of the management training consultants working on this 360 degree feedback project, the prevailing organisational culture tended to resist change despite the change programmes which were gathering momentum in all areas of the Council. These changes were responses to government imperatives, with the aim of improving overall service levels through changes of practice, efficiency improvements and restructuring. The development programmes were extended over three years, with people who began the process in year one repeating the 360 degree survey in year two, and so on. In parallel to this, new learning sets were also begun each year, bringing additional people into the programme.

During this programme staff turnover was high, so the intended continuity was difficult to achieve. External facilitators were used to ‘deliver’ the 360 degree feedback interpretation through individual one-to-one meetings.

### **Fieldwork**

Telephone interviews were used to collect the data. There were 8 participants in this case-study.

### **Preliminary results**

Take-up of the 360 degree feedback component was compulsory for all the programme participants and the response from the people interviewed seemed generally rather negative and cautious.

Evaluation interviews yielded many sarcastic comments about the approach, mostly aimed at the data collection and questionnaire design features. These factors are hygiene factors in most case studies, but here they seemed to represent deeper feelings: the improvement of design and operation of the instrument over three repeat programmes did not reduce feelings. This information is background knowledge, rather than interview derived, because of my involvement in this work with the Council over that time.

The level of cynicism in the overall response is unusual amongst the case-studies of this research. Managers and staff were not in control of the 360 degree process - trust levels

were extremely low (evidenced by the guarding of anonymity of all raters who responded) and response to feedback was often defensive (but some commented that being involved in the 360 degree feedback caused them to think of others more – others as colleagues as well as others as providers of feedback). In addition, career development within the Council did not appear to be a motivating influence.

The message that participants seemed to take from the way it was presented to them was that 360 degree feedback is such a sensitive and confidential matter that only trained external facilitators are equipped to handle it properly. The method is thus depicted as a background danger or threat and, rather than having the effect of developing an open feedback culture, it seemed to have the opposite effect, with comments such as: “...*not really sure why I couldn't have had this with my boss. [...It...] it was never really explained to us at the start*” and “*I didn't really get on with the chap who went through the report with me. It was all a bit quick and timetabled. I'm sure he got me mixed up with someone else at one point*”.

Similar points were made by others, such as:

*“I was a bit anxious about it all. I didn't always find the learning sets good and some people left and then we get the feedback from someone else too”* and

*“The report feedback should be less formal I think and I'd rather use it to plot some real training”* and

*“I didn't like any aspect of this. The feedback bit was only going through a report and I thought it was all pretty obvious”*

Other points fell into themes that had been coded in other case studies. These themes were:

- Support
- Disposition to feedback
- Trust
- Data Collection

Two people mentioned the fact that it was interesting to be given the task of sitting down to reflect on the behaviours of co-workers. In the map below I have called this ‘Interest in Others’ rather than ‘Relationships with Co-Workers’, which gives a stronger sense of attachment and interaction.

Here are some examples of the comments which suggested the coding used with Local Authority:

## **Support**

Examples of comments in this category were: *“We’d never seen these competencies before. I don’t know whether they are connected with the Council’s vision or not”* and *“Why did we have to rely on someone external to talk about the feedback? Who we’d never see again. What do they do with that information?”* Also: *“Big bits of my job aren’t even covered by the questionnaire – I can’t see how I can use this to move on”*

## **Disposition to Feedback**

Examples of issues in this category were comments such as:

*“I found I could agree with ratings from some people but with others I wouldn’t”*

## **Trust**

This category was evidenced by remarks such as:

*“I got feedback from several people but wasn’t sure I should take that much notice of some”*

*“Nowhere on the form did it say clearly that the results were confidential. I had to ask to get that answer”*

*“The questions are spot on reflecting on a range of leadership and managerial styles and the complexities of technical skills and political environment. The deduction and interpretation of the scores could be vital. Can it be value-free?”*

*“I would hope that feedback from this process (to the participant) will feature only the outcomes not individual results”*

## **Data Collection**

Here there were comments which were critical of the design of the instrument, such as:

*“The criteria (questionnaire items) weren’t clear enough and were duplicated “*

*“There was no alternative for the visually impaired”*

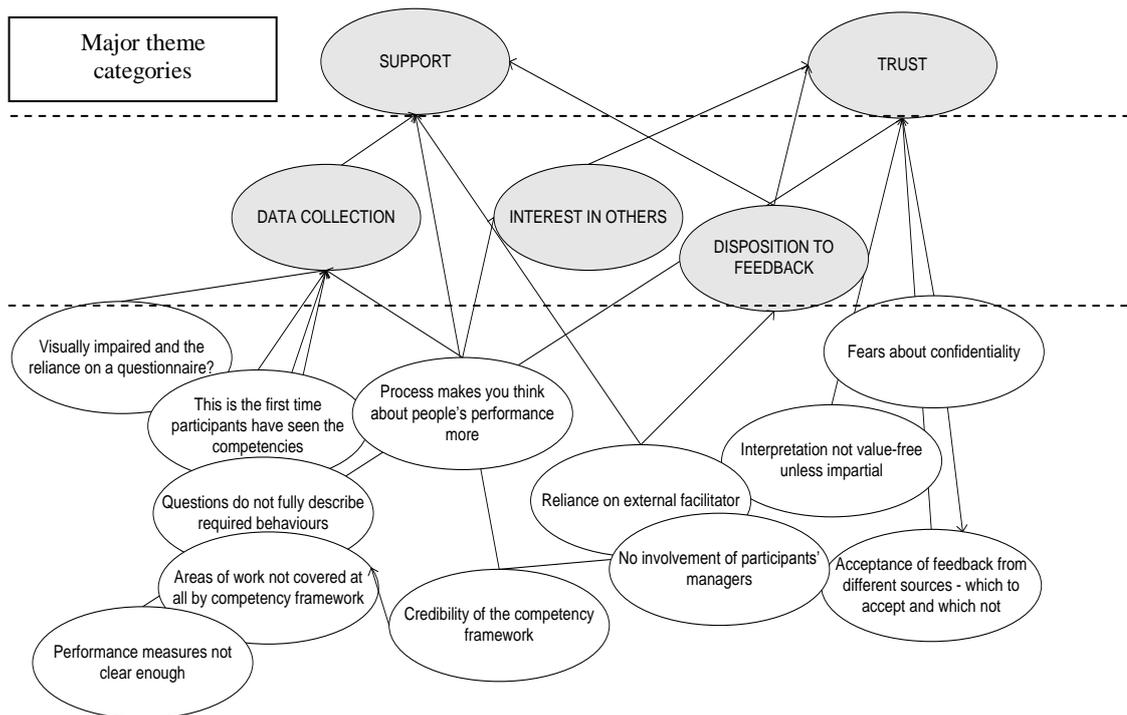
*“I know these types of questionnaires are used quite a lot and I have filled in several for people in commercial organisations. I do feel however that they reflect the view of the person designing the questionnaire. I would prefer a blank piece of paper and the opportunity to describe the person based on my own knowledge and perceptions. I don’t believe a questionnaire can fit all. I think the concept of a 360 degree view whether it is a customer or an employee is flawed”*

On the other hand, people who do the repeats of 360 degree feedback each year (as part of the programme) find that the process becomes more straightforward:

*“I have completed questionnaires for colleagues before, this made it easier and quicker”*

*“Having completed these forms before, it’s now an easy task”*

The main areas of participant comment and the resultant theme headings are shown in the map below in Figure 12:



**Figure 12 Map of themes emerging from Local Authority views**

An interesting observation created by carrying out this mapping exercise was of the emergence of themes from largely negative or critical views and issues. The major thematic categories that I propose at the top of the map correspond to those that have emerged in other cases, but here they seem to represent the need for a different cultural setting for the 360 degree feedback programme to succeed, not simply redesign of the methodology or application.

## **PURPOSE: MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (Example 2)**

### **Case-study 5 The Charity**

The context of the 360 degree feedback application was a linkage with a major management development programme which took 150 of the senior staff of this charity through a series of workshops in order to bring management attitudes and skills into line with the strategic aims of the third sector. The programme is intended to roll out over 18 months to include all of these managers.

People attend an introductory workshop and then go on to complete a 360 degree feedback exercise. They receive one-to-one feedback during which they are encouraged to identify their own main development needs. This feedback session is facilitated by a small team of internal training staff and the meetings can be 2 hours in duration.

### **Fieldwork**

Telephone interviewing. Compared with the other case studies, the sample was small. Three people in total.

### **Results**

There are limits on the numbers of raters who can contribute (only two direct reports, two colleagues and one boss).

Similar misgivings were expressed about the use of an external facilitator to those shown at Local Authority. Feelings about the interpretation of the reports by the external facilitator vary - some recipients felt that it was not always accurate. Some respondents felt that they had to correct the facilitator's preconceived judgements about development needs. The main worry was that the facilitator stands between the participant and his or her manager, so an erroneous interpretation will then pass to the participant's boss, who is only involved in the feedback process at a later stage. This gives rise to a negative attitude towards the value of 360 degree feedback. I have classified these views under the headings of

- Trust, and
- Support

Evaluation of this programme by the Charity is ongoing at the time of writing. The small sample size and the restricted range of comments make the use of any mapping unnecessary.

## **PURPOSE: MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (Example 3)**

### **Case-study 6 The Service Company**

The Service Company is a Business Process Outsourcing company. As a company it is extremely successful at generating cash, but this article extract from ‘The Finance Director’ from August 2003 describes how it differs from many others in the service sector:

*“the Service Company touches the lives of 33 million people, but few have heard of it - and fewer still know what it does. Even FD Gordon Hurst describes it, somewhat vaguely, as a ‘professional support services company’. But whatever the Service Company does, it seems to work - last year it turned over £691m and its profits were up a quarter at £53m.*

#### **‘The Financial Director’ interview**

360 degree feedback was used by the Service Company as part of an organisation-wide management development programme. Questionnaires were completed online prior to attendance on the course and participation was obligatory. Reports were distributed to participants on day 1, during which a one-to-one facilitation session was provided. Facilitation was carried out by the course trainers, whose skills and approach were generally well regarded by participants. This first session was perceived as useful, albeit rather short, at 15 minutes maximum.

Although this first session assisted people with their interpretation, the results were not then used until a very short (5 minutes) feedback session on the third and final day of the programme. This was unanimously considered to be a negative experience: far too short and also adding personal stress to the end of the event, which had until that point been regarded as successful.

Follow-up was offered through the external training company but since this would incur added costs it was not taken up. Follow-up and development by individuals was inconsistently applied and generally weak, with no guidance or links with organisational strategy. Discussion with line managers was optional and seldom explored.

## **Fieldwork**

Telephone interviews. There were eight participants.

## **The Service Company results**

The result of the set of organisational conditions described above was that overall perception of 360 degree feedback as a method was positive but there was a strongly held majority view that an opportunity had been wasted. In the words of one participant: *“Brilliant concept if people buy into it 100%. A major positive (outcome) is learning both ways from the feedback”*.

From the organisational perspective, the feedback had a hit-or-miss effect: it was down to individuals to follow their development plans or not. The percentage of participants likely to progress their development systematically is low, given the highly task-focused and urgent nature of the organisational culture.

Overall impressions of using 360 degree feedback were positive, with the comprehensiveness and detail of the feedback being cited as valuable indicators of existing strengths and areas for performance improvement.

The three factors rated as most significant appear to be

- Support
- Self development and learning
- Relationships with co-workers

The example comments which led to this classification of factors are as follows:

## **Support**

There were many comments about the standard of facilitation during the first feedback session on the programme. Most were positive:

*“Facilitator professionally was very good - open.....I felt at ease...was happy to discuss anything with him.”*

*“Interaction with facilitator was good. He clarified why some opinions were because of interpretation of the question.”*

But there were occasional complaints:

*“negative point was - an independent facilitator - no interest or concern. He was going through motions - the facilitator felt he was a 'worthwhile case' - not going to change. I may simply have been unlucky?”*

But in terms of the time devoted to reflection and application:

*“Felt it was rushed - timetabled, I lost minutes and didn't get them back.”*

*“Got me to look at things in different ways - helpful - could have done with another meeting.”*

*“The worst thing was the cramming of the goal-setting session into a 5 minute session on the course.”*

*“...But the session at the end of the programme was only 5 minutes. Caused some people a lot of stress.”*

*“My feeling is if it's ..... without support then it'll fall by the wayside.”*

*“I'm pretty self motivated but probably need reviews.”*

Positive views were expressed when people felt that ongoing support and dialogue was a natural extension of the programme:

*“My manager knows about the outcomes from the programme and is a mentor - we get together for informal chats.”*

But with this proviso about the scale of further development:

*“Big development things....activities ....are actually very difficult to fit in.”*

In fact, informality is often cited (in several organisations) as particularly valuable, more so, even, than formal reviews.

### **Self-development and learning**

Some people are predisposed to self development whereas others need more guidance and incentive (Baldry and Fletcher, 2000). Personal reaction to the feedback is one factor and this depends on the type of feedback, its relevance and also on personal orientation towards receiving feedback in general. The self-development factor can in turn be affected by the degree of support, mentioned above. Comments relating to this theme were: *“I’ll probably forget it (the PDP) to be honest. My development is mainly refinement.”*

*“I haven’t written a development plan, the feedback confirmed my areas of weakness but it was also nice to see areas in which I wasn’t perceived as weak but had felt I might be.”*

*“I didn’t really come out with a development plan ...because of workload”*

*“Importance ranking was useful. I can see if the weaknesses are worth bothering with.*

*“I analysed all the feedback areas and saw this as a new approach that would help me. I won’t change myself as a person overnight so what are the key points I can address? I try to bring them into day to day work. I’d like to take stock in a month’s time but ..... workload. Since the course there’s been extra business pressure.”*

There was an overall tendency for people’s development commitment to wane after the appraisal meeting and for development objectives to be put to one side.

### **Relationships with co-workers**

Once people have been through a 360 degree feedback process, there is often an effect on their relationships with their co-workers. The most successful 360 degree systems encourage more dialogue between participants and their bosses and more informal discussion between participants and their team members. This generally leads to a more open approach towards communication (London and Smither, 2001).

The feelings of the Service Company programme participants about this area were mixed. Some people clearly felt that there had been little impact, for example: *“No further support since the programme - but I did talk to my boss of my own volition afterwards. We discussed his own feedback points and to check the relative importance of them if there was a gap. But essentially it was all down to me. It was a positive meeting but....no substance - different 'styles' and he has no interest in training.”*

Other participants reported a positive outcome:

*“It swings relationships in positive ways (but not managers - peers, and reports only). The message to peers and reports was 'I care about your views' so it has a positive effect.”*

And: *“There’s been a positive effect on team relationships ...now more open, more approachability.”*

*“I would like my team to use it (360 feedback) for their own development/PDRs - it’s good for team building AND team interactions.”*

There was no consistent picture. Outcomes seemed to vary with each individual.

### **Synopsis of the Service Company results**

The important factors emerging from this overall research which affect the success of 360 degree feedback system appear to be :

1. The feedback culture that people work within,
2. The way that different people respond to getting feedback
3. The accountability people have for making the process work

These factors combine to determine the success or otherwise of feedback interventions or processes. For point number two, people will react to feedback according to how deeply it affects them - personal criticism is more slowly accepted than critical opinion about task performance for example. During this evaluation I had no access to the questionnaire so cannot comment, except to say that the moderating factor on personal reaction to feedback is usually the appropriate design of questionnaire items.

In the Service Company group there were some concerns. The interview results identify greatest strength of feeling around the level of support they receive around the 360 degree feedback process or event, the subsequent development opportunities and the need to build relationships to allow this (360 degree feedback) process to work. Addressing these areas, it was felt, would enhance the existing system and add value to the learning process. People suggested possible interventions that could achieve these aims. The suggestions fell into the following categories :

- There should be follow-up after the programme to build commitment to the development (or improvement) process

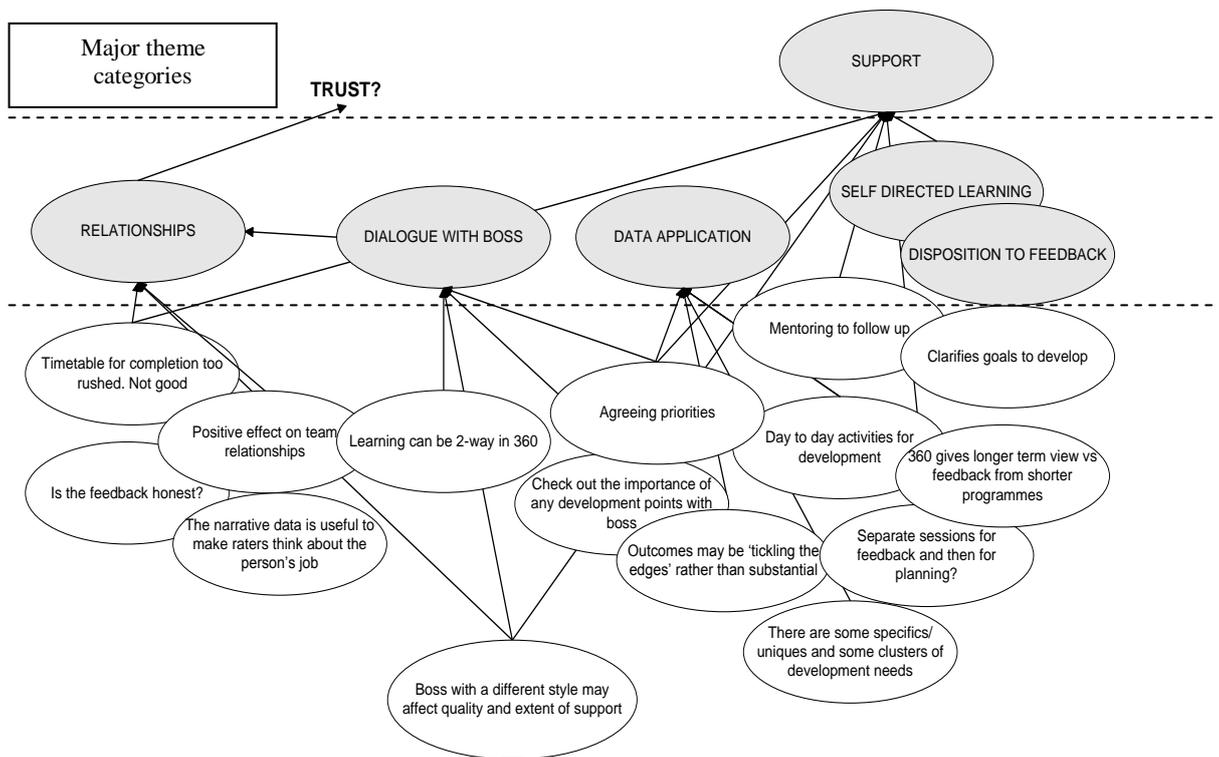
- Involve bosses in the follow-up (with implications for training)
- Integrate the use of independent facilitators and internal follow-up and guidance
- Improve the timetabling within the programme to get more from the process and lead on to effective development planning.

Points about the system that met with the Service Company participants' approval were:

- The ease of access to the system and ease of use and the comprehensiveness, detail and clarity of the reports
- The facilitation was felt to be well delivered
- Receiving the feedback encouraged more informed discussions with the team back at work

The 360 degree feedback system received approval as a potential method of improving performance and working relationships. Most people have found the feedback illuminating and informative at the personal level but have not necessarily converted this into a positive agenda for personal development.

The visual mapping analysis isolated the two major thematic categories that appeared to most heavily influence the responses in the interviews: Relationships and Support. The interview comments about the importance of relationships (between participant and manager and between participant and raters) did not strongly suggest, as in other cases, a reliance on trust in an organisational sense. The impression given was more around efficiency when relationships are taken into account, although this may well be because of the reliance on others: hence on the map the question-mark around the possible major category of 'Trust'. The overall map is shown in figure 13 below:



**Figure 13 Mapping of themes arising from 360 degree feedback at the Service Company**

Factors which were perceived to affect Relationships included an aspect of accountability amongst raters - can they be trusted to give honest feedback? The effect of this degree of trust can have effects on team relationships generally and some examples were around people being keen to go back to their teams after the programme and talk to them about the feedback they had given. This was seen as a way of developing stronger and more open working relationships. In terms of the 360 degree feedback instrument, it was the section summarising narrative responses that was believed to provide the most useful information.

The timetabling of the facilitated feedback session meant that a positive element of other 360 degree feedback applications was absent - the relationship between facilitator (either manager or coach) is felt to be important.

## **PURPOSE: MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (Example 4)**

### **Case-study 7 Finance Company 2**

#### **Company background and the environment for 360 degree feedback**

Finance Company 2 is a subsidiary of a large motor car manufacturer providing the finance of discount invoicing and factoring. It has been through several significant organisational (and cultural) changes in a short space of time: in 1998 it was sold by a large UK bank to a bank in the USA. This meant adapting to an American business approach which avoided investment in personal development and which relied on a command and control style of management from the USA. Against this backdrop the company headcount was reduced over two years from 800 to 300 people. At the time of these interviews the business was acquired by another company, which had a less autocratic style but nevertheless made it clear that sound company performance was a compulsory requirement. There was therefore an overall sense of being measured and waiting for a final decision of some sort. In contrast to the US bank, the new parent company regarded corporate morale and culture as an indicator of successful performance. Attitude surveys, run from America, are frequent. But investment in human resource development is only now beginning again, after a gap of five years.

This historical context is a significant factor in determining people's responses to change and development. Being used to following instructions rather than making decisions has left the senior and middle managers ill-equipped to run the business effectively. There is considerable inertia at board level, which is also somewhat top-heavy for such a small company, and there is a lack of confidence at middle manager level. The concept of performance feedback was therefore a difficult one for most people to embrace and then to apply.

The apparently distinct phases of different organisational culture provides an interesting point of reference because some people were employed throughout, thus experiencing three separate regimes in relatively rapid (5 years) succession. Stage 1 was the positively viewed original culture created by the parent bank of the time. A rapid takeover by the US bank produced stage 2, where no developmental opportunities existed and downsizing was extensive. The Stage 3 is currently being experienced with the new parent company and

people are cautiously optimistic, seeing the management development programme as a positive sign of commitment to development.

## **Fieldwork**

Face-to-face interview. There were 19 participants in the case-study, seven Directors and twelve middle to senior managers.

## **Results**

This organisation allowed me access to two management levels where 360 degree feedback was being used, each with different objectives. One application was as an element of a teambuilding event with the senior management team, the Directors. The other application was as part of a standard management development programme, although this was the first formal development opportunity that many participants had ever had. So, given the company history and the newness of any significant management training, these applications of 360 degree feedback were taking place under conditions of considerable organisational change and personal uncertainty.

## **The Director group**

The reaction to the feedback by the board directors during their teambuilding event was one of interest and curiosity, despite some initial misgivings about taking part. A common reaction was of interest in the competency indicators being used for the questionnaire (based on a generic competency framework for company directors (Institute of Directors publication, 1995): for all of these senior managers the list of indicators gave them their first notion of the broad range of Directors' responsibilities. *"I was surprised to see the range of activity that we're supposed to get involved in as Directors!"* was one comment. And another was: *"The initial feeling of being overwhelmed gave way to more positive ones - I know where I'm doing well and intend to get talking to people around this when I can."*

The main aim of the facilitation session around this feedback was to look at common areas of weakness and to focus participants on a manageable and achievable set of development priorities. Because this was the senior management team, the Chief Executive acted as a

participant at the same level as the rest of the board. Hence there was no 'boss' as such, and consequently no follow-up meeting after the workshop to discuss results. Some participants took up the option of externally facilitated coaching to take the process forward, but the majority did not. Those who dealt with their own development plans tended to lose sight of their original plans and objectives as the urgent demands of the business gradually became their main concern again. Those who sustained a level of coaching support were subsequently much more aware of their career options and future development.

### **The management development programme participants**

Participants attended a management skills programme which was practical and experiential in emphasis, involving group and outdoor activities for problem solving and teamworking. On the penultimate afternoon of the programme they were provided with a fifteen minute, one-to-one facilitation session to go over the use of the feedback reports which they had received prior to attending.

Overall reception to the 360 degree feedback element was positive, although there were criticisms and people felt that there was room for improvement, especially in the way the method was introduced and also in the need for information about possible further support.

The greatest number of comments were about:

- Organisational development,
- Disposition to feedback, and
- Support.

Furthermore, I found that a thematic code which had not arisen until now emerged from many of the comments. This code I called 'Accountability'.

For the middle managers on the development programme, a short one-to-one facilitated feedback session of 15 minutes duration was not felt to be sufficient. The session came towards the end of a five-day programme and although attempts were made in the design to allow time for reflection and for planning, the need for discussion was clear. One possibility, yet to be trialled, was the formation of self-help groups. Since this moves people in the direction of action learning (Bourner & Tamkin, 2000) it may be a logical step to use this as the next stage of management development.

Comments about further support for development included:

*“I’ll need to begin a dialogue using this feedback with my boss, but with three bosses at the moment I’m going to have to work with one but I wonder just how prepared they’ve been for doing this”*

This kind of comment suggests that people would take advantage of working with their boss on their development plan as long as the relationship was productive and that managers have the skills and commitment to adopt this role.

The company is also planning to launch a mentoring scheme soon but details of this were unavailable at the time of the interviews. A number of interviewees mentioned that they knew of it but that they had no further information about the scheme. This raises the question about the working relationship between feedback subjects and their bosses; would the mentoring scheme interfere with the pathway to getting best value from the 360 degree feedback intervention? In many organisations, the perceived value of 360 degree feedback is that it acts as a catalyst for building constructive working relationships with the boss.

Other comments that relate to support were:

*“It’s up to you and your line manager what you do with this (feedback). You take it forward into the business .... No one else can do it for you”,*

and also these apparently opposing views:

*“I really wanted advice on my development plan from the facilitation session and was disappointed that it looked just at interpretation and that there wasn’t enough time”*

Which contrasts with:

*“... there’s no need to go over the report during the training programme - you can see where the links between the course and the feedback are and I’ve already set up an informal meeting with my boss”*

Most other comments about support were around the pros and cons of getting briefing communication and feedback reports before attending the programme. There were no comments that suggested people expected any further training, although the interviews were conducted only six weeks after the end of the management development course. This

does suggest, however, that the legacy of the previous culture of lack of investment had dampened expectations amongst most managers.

Managers saw evidence of the value of their feedback in organisational development, many comments relating the use of their feedback as discussion topics with their bosses and thence as more reliable indicators for the setting of their objectives. People also mentioned the value of this kind of intervention (360 degree feedback and development programme) in altering corporate culture, or at least signalling that changes were occurring.

### **Synopsis of Finance Company 2 results**

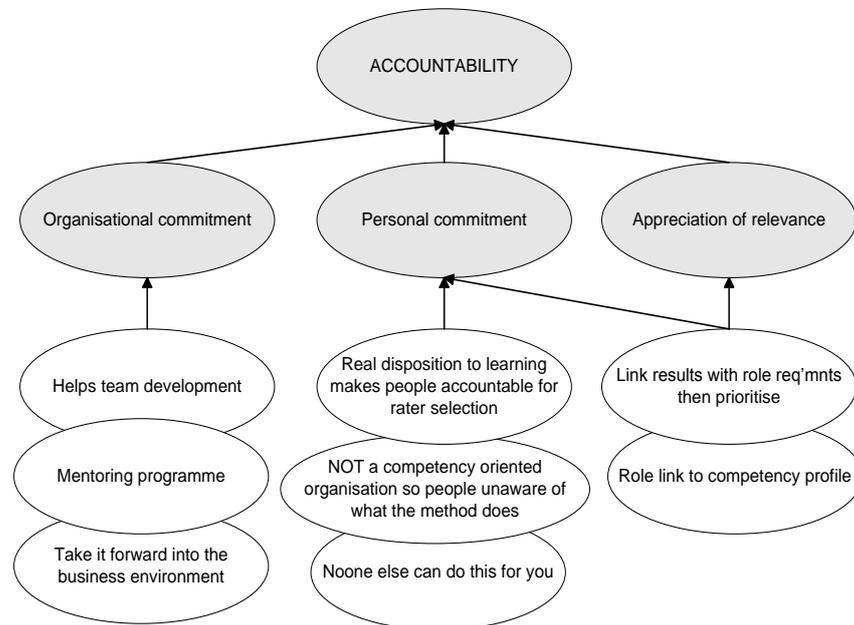
The construct of 'accountability' appeared in the Finance Company 2 interviews, although not explicitly stated. Comments such as : *"It's up to you and your line manager what you do with this information"* and *"Take it forward into the business environment...nobody else can do this for you"*....occurred several times.

And the notion of trusting one's raters also emerged, through remarks such as: *"at the end of the day this (feedback process) is just for us so there's no point in selecting raters just to get ratings biased in your favour"*

There was also a question around how the 360 degree system would be used if it, and any subsequent development, were to be voluntary. Several participants felt that others would avoid using the method, perhaps a hangover from the previous corporate culture?

Accountability in terms of accepting the feedback as a reflection of performance also featured in a number of interviews: some participants would rationalise their feedback by suggesting that their role required slightly different competencies than those being rated. Some went on to accept the validity of their raters' observations and when they did they then felt able to go forward to the next stage and talk openly with their boss about development. But those who had not accepted or acknowledged the feedback felt inhibited about discussing results, which meant that the openness of the dialogue, if any, was restricted and also that subsequent development activity was not targeted.

That there is a combined effect of accountability and commitment to the organisation was apparent from these interviews. Some of these combining factors are shown below in figure 14:



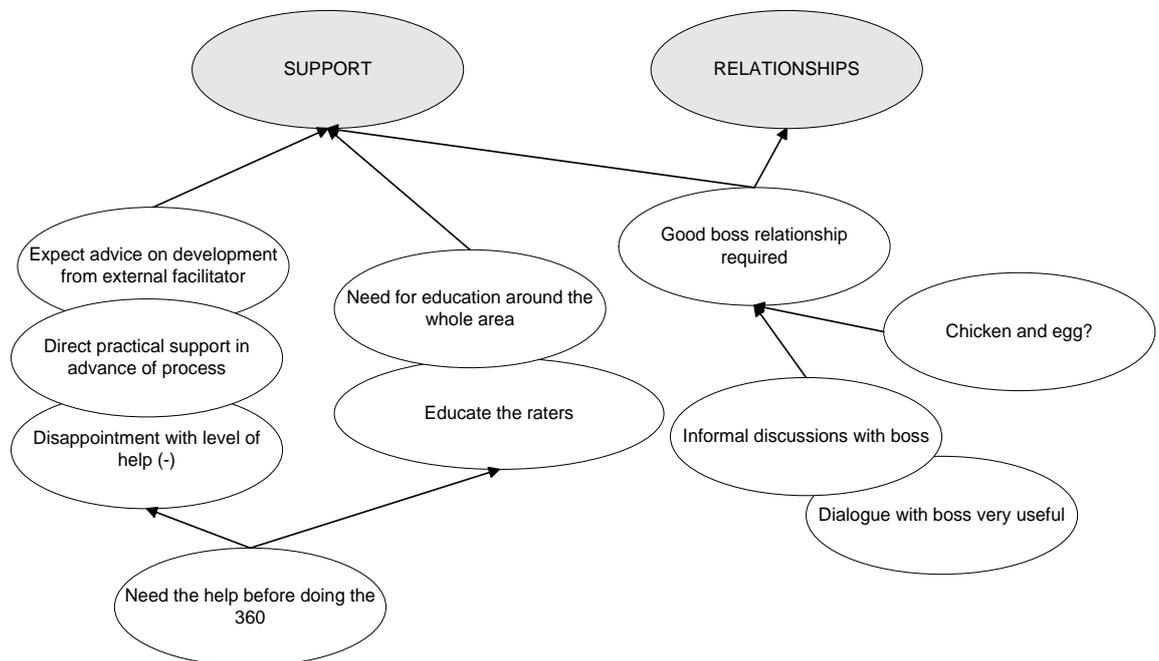
**Figure 14 Finance Company 2 partial map of interactions: Organisation Commitment and Accountability**

This part of the overall map of Finance Company 2 interactions focuses on organisation commitment and the notion of accountability. There seemed to be three areas that contribute to accountability: personal, organisational and a perception that the 360 degree data is pertinent to roles and job activity.

The comments were generally giving the impression that people saw the 360 degree feedback process as important enough to consider how to get the best information from it (selection of appropriate raters, taking it seriously, using the information). The comments also suggest an awareness of the organisational improvements that would result (team development improvements, the business impact of professional development, the clarity around roles). This suggested that people felt accountable to the sponsors or the organisation for their contribution to the feedback process. The point at which this is reinforced seems to be during the dialogue that occurs when discussing results with the boss.

The design of the instrument and the communication of its purpose also seem to be significant. If people see that a competency assessment like this accurately assesses their performance in their specific role, and that the organisational reasons for this are to improve overall performance, then they comment that the process is justified and become accountable for subsequent improvement activities.

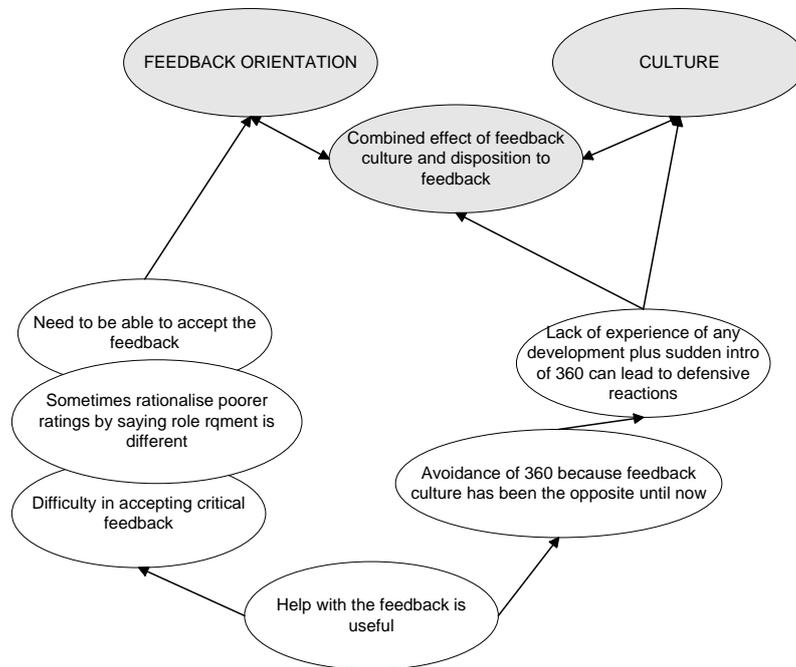
To assist participants, the support framework then becomes important. Relationships with the boss, the fact that 360 degree feedback provides a catalyst for further discussion and the correct positioning of any further development all appear to be significant factors in people's minds, as shown below in figure 15:



**Figure 15 Map of Finance Company 2 themes: support and relationships**

The concept of support affects many parts of the 360 feedback system, from the initial 'education of raters' ( providing them with instruction and building their ability to assess objectively) to the relationship with the boss. In this particular programme, participants felt that they needed more preparatory information about the nature of 360 degree feedback and how it related to the recently introduced organisational competencies. This support framework could also be regarded as an aspect of 'communication'.

People’s personal feedback orientations, their disposition to feedback, interacted with the performance of the 360 degree system in a number of ways, summarised in figure 16 below:



**Figure 16 Relationships between Finance Company 2 factors linked with disposition to feedback**

Those people who were already more sensitive to critical feedback felt particularly vulnerable in this case: because there was little preliminary communication and little guidance on interpretation. This is the case regardless of whether the feedback is highly critical or positive. The overlay of organisational culture may be significant here too. People had little performance feedback until this programme and were suddenly given the task of interpreting and processing quite sensitive information. People who displayed greater levels of self confidence were more likely to adapt to this and to view it constructively. This suggests that the facilitator role was to manage the feedback to ensure that people accepted and used it, regardless of their own predispositions.

## **PURPOSE: OCCASIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SUCCESSION (Example 1)**

### **Case-study 8 Mapping Agency**

#### **Introduction**

The mapping agency creates and prints around ten million paper maps every year, but in addition to that, trade in *electronic* data now make up about 80% of the Mapping Agency's turnover. Its products help to support a wide range of business and public sector services - supermarkets, fast food chains, environmental charities and emergency services are examples. Independent estimates (OXERA, 1999) suggest that Mapping Agency data now contributes to over £100 billion-worth of economic activity in Britain every year.

It is a private sector company, trading commercially but reporting to the UK Government. The organisation has many technical specialists working in a traditional departmental structure where the work is determined by a management-by-objectives approach through departmental heads.

#### **The application**

The origin of this 360 degree feedback project is as follows. All staff with people management responsibilities who were Directors, Senior and Middle Managers, and Technical Business Managers took part in a 360 degree feedback programme between November 2001 and February 2002. The concept of 360 degree feedback was not new to the Mapping Agency. It had previously been used for Middle Manager Development Centres, Senior Manager Assessment Centres, and for Directors. Another project (the “New Way of Working”) was underway at the same time to more fully identify how change would impact on people management; how people needed to be rewarded in the light of the business, and the cultural environment in which the business must operate. It was clear that good performance management – both the systems and the way in which they are used – would be critical to business success, and that 360 degree feedback would be an integral part of future performance management. In this context, the programme was an “experiment” to identify how 360 degree feedback might best support actions arising from the “New Way of Working” project.

The main objectives of the programme were stated as follows:

- A. To promote a more open culture where giving and receiving feedback is an accepted norm
- B. To help improve the way staff are lead and managed
- C. To provide balanced information to support performance management.

The programme was conducted using a web-based system from an external supplier.

### **Fieldwork**

Face-to-face interview. There were 10 participants.

### **Synopsis of Mapping Agency Results**

The feeling of most participants was that 360 degree feedback is a potentially useful tool. Where it was considered to be falling short of its potential the main reasons cited were about the following features.

One area was around the attitudes of bosses, for example: *“Without my manager backing the process, I was never going to get out of it what I should”* Communication culture in the organisation was another area of concern: *“A non-event as the feedback confirmed what we already knew. He did not know how to give feedback, so that while the information was useful to me, the meeting was less so.”*

The other main obstacle was the fact that the review process was not connected with broader organisational systems such as performance review: *“I believe it should be an integral part of the performance management process and not sit in isolation as it does now.”*

Once the transcripts were coded, the factors regarded as most important emerged as:

1. Trust
2. Support
3. Disposition to feedback
4. Data Collection

The majority of comments (whether positive or negative in attitude) fell into these coded categories. Examples are given below:

### **Trust**

Under this heading came comments about the level to which people were encouraged to have discussions about their feedback: *“Although I operate an open policy with staff, some tend to shy away from commenting. This exercise has allowed them to make their comments and for me to talk about issues with them.”* and *“There were misconceptions on both sides that we were able to discuss and resolve”*

### **Support**

This was generally described as the amount of commitment that was visible to participants, either from their managers or from the general organisational framework that people work within. *“It’s essential to get full management buy-in to this, not just spending time on evaluating the information with people, but making it a positive experience for people.”* And another example was: *“Without the support this process won’t achieve all we hoped or expected”*

Explicit descriptions of exactly what the support mechanisms would actually be varied with each interviewee, but the underlying concern was about whether or not participants could see evidence of some interest in helping people through the process and beyond.

### **Disposition to feedback**

There were extremes within this category. From: *“We need to move away from questionnaires and make feedback part of what we do”* to: *“The whole exercise was a total waste of time and will have no effect on how anyone else manages”* (On further probing, this interviewee professed similar misgivings about performance appraisals and believed that *“results speak for themselves”*)

But a frequently expressed view was represented by the following comment: *“Open people who accept constructive criticism OK will find this process useful”*

## **Data Collection Methods**

The importance of this category as a hygiene factor was well demonstrated by this case-study organisation. The supplier of the software had moved only recently into collecting questionnaire data online. This meant, because it was done in the early days of online technology development, that access to questionnaires was cumbersome and time consuming for all raters.

This meant that some people used the system quite easily and hardly commented at all on the process, concentrating more on the personal and organisational factors described above. But many participants found the obstacles important enough to spend interview time mentioning them: *“Very long winded to get the results printed out”* and *“No one realised there was a time-out”* and *“A bit boring but it did the job”* and also *“It was a very clear web site once you put the correct codes in the right boxes”*

Other case-study organisations in my research barely mentioned the data collection except to say about how much time it took from their schedules.

## **Summary of the Mapping Agency findings**

Six of the ten interviewees remarked that they had not taken this 360 degree review seriously because it had not been part of a performance review. Some went on to suggest that the process should be an integral part of the performance management process and not sit in isolation as it did in this case. There were many comments about the need for both participants and their managers to be prepared for the feedback itself – the interpersonal skills of managers and the receptivity to feedback (feedback orientation) from participants. These areas can be addressed to some extent through training events, but people were more concerned with the overall support people get for such activity and also cited elements of organisational (or ‘feedback’) culture as being necessary.

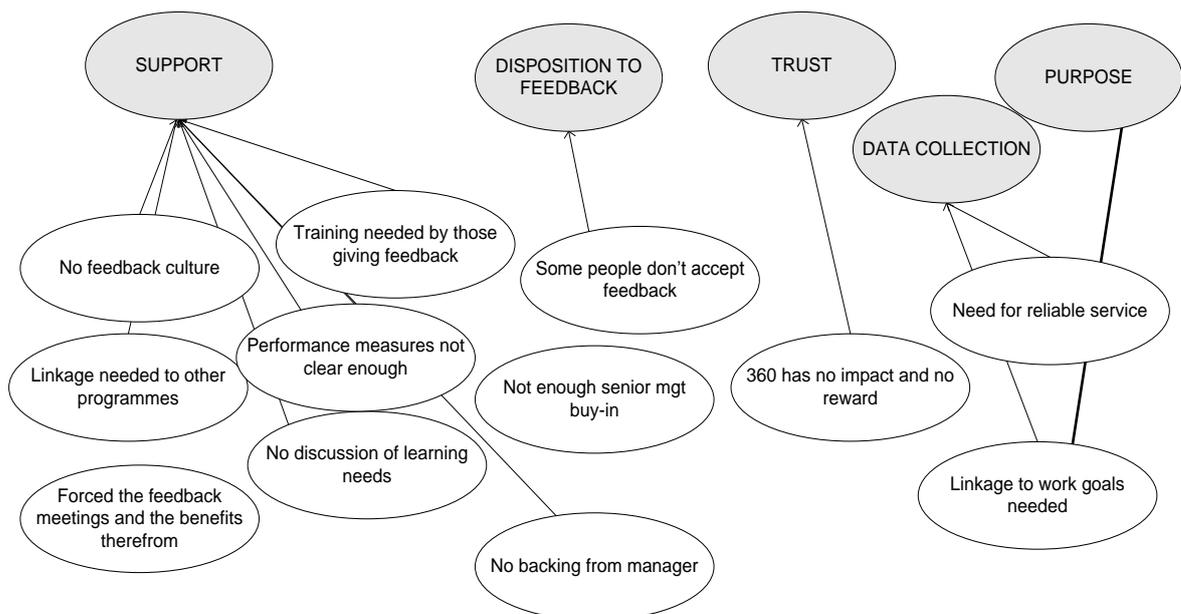
The feedback culture that people felt necessary to support 360 degree feedback effectively was a combination of the standards set around the definition of, and support for, the process: *“People who give feedback need training”* and *“there need to be better competencies in these – I don’t see the link between them and our overall business strategy”*. Another comment along these lines was *“our performance measures aren’t really clear. All these ratings are fine for comparing views on my performance but what*

level they actually represent isn't clear" and another was: "this needs to be clearly linked to my work goals. I need to talk to my boss for that but he doesn't know where any of this fits"

There were other comments: "this would be great if it were repeated or linked to some consistent programme" and "You can do brilliantly in this review and still not actually get any reward for it!"

In terms of the feedback orientation points that were made, it seems that people who actively seek feedback and who go on to use it are more likely to benefit. "I really value feedback – good or bad" and "I actually ask people to be as critical as possible with their feedback, otherwise you may get some bland results" Also: "I know people who go after good news about themselves and I don't see the point of that"

Taking the openness to feedback component a little further, there is an aspect with broader implications perhaps: the freedom to learn from feedback. And the understanding that mistakes can often be learning points as long as they are associated with effective feedback. Example comments were: "not many people here discuss their learning needs openly or are willing to talk about mistakes with their boss" and: "people tend to hold on to information too much. So my boss may not even tell me when I need to know something about improving" I have summarised these various factors in the map in figure 17 below.



**Figure 17 Map of factors in the Mapping Agency**

## **PURPOSE: OCCASIONAL DEVELOPMENT/SUCCESSION (Example 2)**

### **Case-study 9 The Retailer**

360 degree feedback is used by the Retailer to provide *ad hoc* additional information about managers as part of a continuous succession planning exercise. People identified for promotion are asked to submit to the process. The development needs thus identified are assessed against the demands of the new role. If necessary, these development needs are addressed before the promotion is made. The feedback results are discussed between the manager, his or her boss and a management development specialist.

In the Retailer, 360 degree review has been used for several years and most managers have experienced the process at least once. Although the process is consistent, the questionnaire content varies according to the skill requirements of different roles. Different competency frameworks are used to assess people for jobs at different levels of seniority.

### **Fieldwork**

Telephone interviewing of eight managers, each interview lasting approximately one hour, yielded transcripts for coding. The eight managers were of different levels of seniority and five of them had been through the 360 degree process more than once.

### **Results**

There was general agreement in the comments made by the eight interviewees, suggesting that the following themes were important in the Retailer setting:

#### **Doubts about the relevance of the 360 degree feedback questionnaire items**

Comments like the one below occurred in half of the interviews, but seemed to be outweighed by more positive feelings about the purpose of the 360 degree review. "*I'm not sure the questionnaire questions are particularly relevant ... or understood well by staff (the raters)*". Another critical comment was: "*Being regional I'm not sure all the staff know enough about me to answer properly*".

### **A feeling that dialogue and discussion is of value**

As exemplified by these comments: *“It gets me to at least sit down with my boss. And gets him to sit down with me”*

*“It’s good to be out of work mode for a bit and talk about my career”*

### **The identification of specific development needs and the provision of support**

This was mentioned through specific examples such as: *“Mark (the company Management Development specialist) gave me development through looking at the feedback so I’m on the training course, which has given me a lot”*

### **The readiness to submit to the process because of its purpose**

Evidence for this includes:

*“I’m happy to get feedback from people. And to accept it as a ‘decider’ for my promotion. If I’m ready it’ll show through this [the 360 degree review]. I only want it if I’m ready for it.”*

And

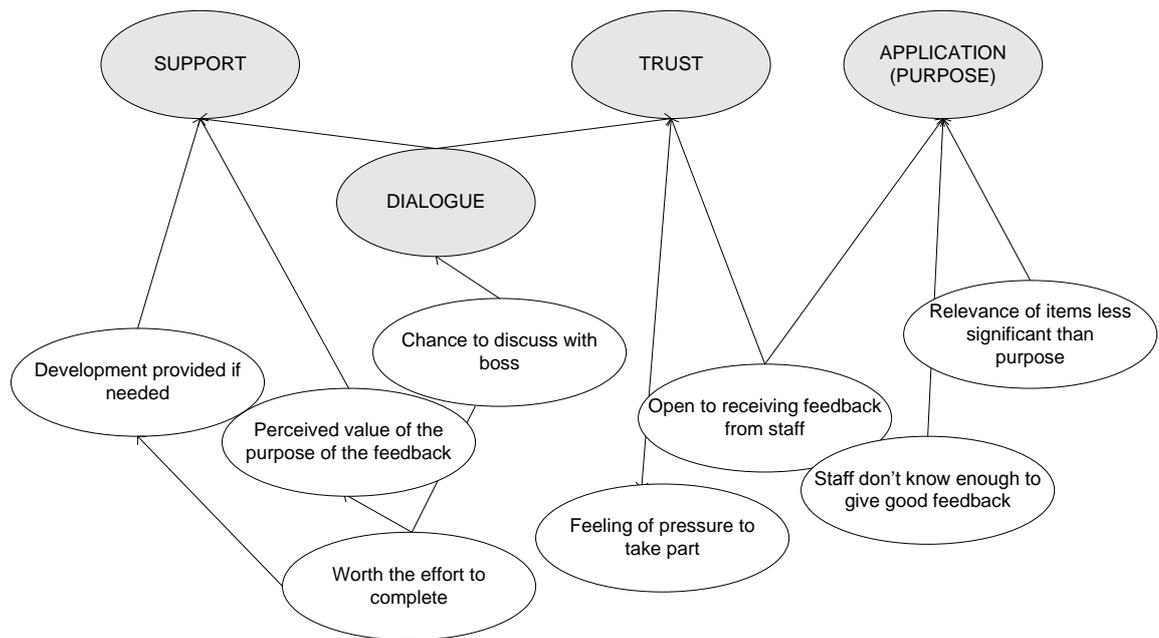
*“It’s difficult to fit the questionnaire in. For all of us [manager and raters] but I think it’s important. A step. And to be asked to do it means something as well.”*

Another comment was:

*“You don’t like to turn it down. But if you’re not ready it’ll show through the feedback you get”.*

Implicit in these results is the acceptance that the 360 degree process is worth going through and that people can be open and transparent, when giving feedback as a rater, in accepting it as a contender for promotion, or in being open about it when discussing the results with the boss. It seemed that in some cases the actual content of the questionnaire (the competencies being rated) was of less concern to participants than the overall system that it serves. Figure 18 summarises the Retailer links between factors that were apparent.

/continued overleaf



**Figure 18 Map of factor relationships at the Retailer**

The Retailer case is the last of the case studies

### **Summary of the within-case analysis**

Certain factors are considered to be important when people experience 360 degree feedback and these emerged through the interviews in each organisation`. They influence the overall conditions during the feedback process and subsequently affect people's reactions.

Adopting the Grounded Theory method, the early coded categories were assembled until they appeared 'saturated', that is, there were no more apparent variations of the category. The mapping process as a result became faster and resulted in less complex maps. As the analysis progressed, the categories were assembled under the following themes, which I have labelled and defined through the coding process described earlier. As explained in Chapter Three, the themes are constructs that I have used in order to collect together several issues (interview statements and descriptions) with similar properties They are not rank-ordered since there has been no quantitative analysis of frequency of comment (the

grounded theory reaches saturation of codes and adds no more to a theme once this point is reached).

The themes are:

1. Trust
2. Support
3. Purpose and significance of feedback
4. Ongoing development and learning
5. Relationships with boss or facilitator
6. Dialogue
7. Disposition to feedback
8. Data Collection (the instrument)
9. Organisational culture

How these themes interact to affect people's responses is explored further in the next section which compares and contrasts case-study group reactions to their experiences. The themes may be antecedents of factors that are implicated in theories which describe different aspects of organisational culture. Through the possible links between the themes derived from the case-studies and existing theoretical frameworks, I will attempt to explore the relevance of these theoretical frameworks to people's responses to 360 degree feedback.

## 4.6 RESULTS PART TWO: Between-case analysis

### Introduction to the between-case analysis

The access to the 360 degree feedback system (whether or not it is an online questionnaire, relaying of questionnaires to raters and the production of the eventual reports) in the case-studies seems to be a ‘hygiene factor’. Where there were problems with access and general usability, people noticed it and expressed frustration with the problems. Where access was easy, people seldom mentioned the quality of the software system or offered opinions on the interface or reports. Consideration of Table 3, reproduced below, suggests ways in which the case-studies can be compared and contrasted: by examining the ‘RAG Rating’ and its variation with respect to the independent variables ‘Purpose’ (of the 360 degree feedback programme) and ‘Support’ (how the feedback is dealt with). These independent variables are groupings which have discrete categories within them.

Rating	Purpose	Organisation	Sector	Instrument	Support	Number of interviewees	Telephone (T) or face to face (F) interview	
Very positive	Occasional Development	Retailer	Private	Paper based	Review with boss	6	T	
	Coaching for development	Finance 1	Private	Online	Internal Coach	12	T	
	Career Development	Security company	Private	Online	Review with boss	10	F	
<b>SUBTOTAL N</b>						<b>28</b>		
Positive with some reservations	Part of management development programme	Service Company	Private ex public	Online	External Facilitator	8	T	
		Conservation Charity	Third sector	Offline	External Facilitator	3	T	
	Annual Appraisal	Marketing Company	Private	Online	Review with boss	8	T	
<b>SUBTOTAL N</b>						<b>19</b>		
Less positive	Occasional Development	Mapping Agency	Public	Online	Review with boss	10	F	
	Part of management development programme	Finance 2	Private	Online	External Facilitator	19	F	
		Local Authority	Public	Offline	External Facilitator	8	T	
<b>SUBTOTAL N</b>						<b>37</b>		
<b>TOTAL N</b>						<b>84</b>		
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>								
						<b>T</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>T</b>
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>								
						<b>F</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>F</b>

Colour Key	
Very positive	
Positive with some reservations	
Less positive	

**Table 3 Participating organisations and their 360 degree feedback environments and the reactions of participants**

## **The analysis**

In this section I will explore differences and similarities between the findings from the case studies.

Those case-studies with the most positive overall attitudes towards 360 degree feedback (in the 'green' category in Table 3 above) were Finance Company 1, the Retailer and the Security Company, all from the private (service) sector. There may be an organisational culture difference (between private and public sector) underlying this finding but it would take a broader- ranging study and survey to establish the validity of this claim.

The heading 'Purpose' in table 3 does not appear to have a correlation with the satisfaction ratings ('development activity' as the purpose for 360 degree feedback features in all three in the green category of satisfaction), but further definition of the term 'Purpose' as it was discussed in the interview settings does suggest an underlying relationship. In Table 3, the term 'Purpose' is used as a label for describing the area of activity that is linked to 360 degree feedback (management development, appraisal and so on). But when the reasons for doing the 360 degree feedback are considered within the context of the organisation and the career of the individual, the significance of its purpose becomes apparent.

If the 360 degree feedback is carried out as a one-off exercise, perhaps linked to general management or personal development, it may be perceived as being of less significance than if it is linked to a major organisational system such as performance review or career progression activity, such as succession planning. Thus, the participation in a 360 degree feedback exercise may well be seen as a 'significant event'. This perception of greater significance can act as the motivation for interpreting the feedback and using it for a sequence of activities for follow-up (on the feedback) and for further development activity. This overall system of feedback and support seems to enhance feelings of satisfaction with 360 degree feedback as a process. All the case-study organisations where help is given with feedback interpretation and also with personal development (planning and activity) showed a distinctly higher satisfaction with the 360 degree feedback level overall. The retail organisation, for example, made it clear what the 360 degree feedback would be used for (succession opportunities) and were able to provide appropriate development for those who showed shortfalls in any part of the 360 degree profiles. And as another example,

Finance Company 1 was able to provide personal coaching to offer guidance on interpretation and performance improvement activity after 360 degree feedback.

In organisations like these, the reasons for providing 360 degree feedback were such that the resultant feedback profiles gave the participants access to career pathways, either directly (career development with the Security Company, succession planning with the Retailer) or indirectly (coaching and development with Finance Company 1). These organisational reasons for using 360 degree feedback were generally perceived as particularly significant, according to the comments made by the participants in their interviews. For example, from the security company: *“It (360 feedback) is a learning experience anyway, but since it is linked to career review it is very important”*, and from the retailer: *“I’m happy to get feedback from people. And to accept it as a ‘decider’ for my promotion. If I’m ready I’ll show it through this”*. These perceptions were possibly based on the linkage between 360 degree feedback and the opportunity for career advancement or support for development.

The second category of case-study organisation of Table 3 (amber category) generally had people feeling less positively about the 360 degree experience and also had different reasons for providing employees with the feedback process. Two of them were using the feedback to inform formal management development programmes (the two were the Service Company and the third sector), whilst the other used 360 degree feedback as part of the formal annual performance appraisal procedure (the Marketing Company). The informal nature of the setting (a management development programme) relegated the 360 degree feedback to the status of being a session within the broader programme. This was likely to allow people to ‘take it or leave it’, as was the case with some of the participants in the Service Company: when under pressure of work, the development was put to one side by some participants. Comments such as: *“Big development things...activities...are actually very difficult to fit in”* and *“My feeling is that if it’s without support then it’ll fall by the wayside”* illustrate these concerns within the Service Company. Others would persist and feel that they got more from the process, evidenced by comments such as: *“It got me to look at things in a different way. Could have done with another meeting”*. The overall effect was mixed because of these different attitudes. A mixed response was also obtained with the participants from the Marketing Company, where, although people were aware the 360 degree feedback was important (this was because of its use as an appraisal measure), some of them felt let down by the lack of follow up after the event, for example:

*“There is a need to formalise the PDPs and to review progress” and “I’ve set some objectives but only things I can do easily – the things that were bigger I don’t think I can tackle.”*

In the ‘red’ category of table 3 are the case-study organisations which I recorded as having least satisfaction with 360 degree feedback experiences. Here the aim of the feedback was again to inform management development but ‘management development’ *per se* was not apparently regarded as important as succession planning or career development unless clear links were made between the programme and some form of ‘accountability’ for taking action on the basis of 360 degree feedback. Comments from Local Authority interviewees, for example, include: *“Big bits of my job aren’t even covered by this questionnaire – I can’t see how I can use this to move on”* and *“I’m not really sure why I couldn’t have had this (discussion) with my boss”*. Similarly, with the Charity, there were misgivings about a facilitator standing between the participant and his or her manager. The Mapping Agency also used 360 degree feedback for management development but participants made such comments as: *“This needs to be better linked to my work goals. I need to talk to my boss about that but he doesn’t see where any of this fits”* and *“This would be great if it was linked to some consistent programme”*. It is apparent that linkage with some defined purpose is perceived as missing amongst participants in these organisations.

So the significance of the reason for doing 360 degree feedback seems to be a factor in how positively it is perceived. The more substantial and clear the ‘connection’ to systems of career advancement, the more seriously the 360 degree process is taken. The importance of the feedback from the viewpoint of the participant also combines with the absence of any difficulty with the software itself to allow the individual’s positive engagement with the feedback process and the next steps: the goal-setting, development planning and intended performance improvement.

But if perceived significance of the reason for doing 360 degree feedback can motivate, then a poor experience in carrying out the 360 degree review and a lack of follow-up can demotivate, whatever the perceived importance of the feedback event. This is equivalent to ‘falling at the first hurdle’; it was clear from interview comments that any negative experience at this stage spoils the overall experience, whatever follows. For example, with the Mapping Agency there were comments such as: *“not many people here discuss their*

*learning needs with their boss*” and with Finance Company 2 there were several comments similar to this one: *“I really wanted development advice from the facilitation and was disappointed that it looked at just interpretation”*. In the Service Company there were comments like: *“I didn’t really come out with a development plan...because of workload”* and *“I had no further support since the programme”*. In all of these case study organisations there were people who had thought the 360 degree feedback useful but had not progressed to using it effectively for development.

Once engaged with the process however, more general cultural factors plus the individual’s own disposition to feedback are presumably more likely to drive the process forward. But the first step in acceptance acts as the gateway to these other factors. The example of the Security Company showed that those people who were fully satisfied with the 360 degree process itself (questionnaire design, access and feedback report design) were more likely to derive satisfaction from the subsequent career development review. For example the comment *“it is easy to use”* represented a commonly held view in the Security Company and these people had also expressed commitment to their subsequent development, evidenced by comments such as: *“It is a learning experience anyway but since it is linked to career review it is very important”*. In contrast, many of the people in the local authority and in the mapping agency were unimpressed with the way their 360 degree feedback was managed and it was difficult to extract from these people a sense of confidence in the process as a whole, despite there being opportunities. From the Local Authority there were comments such as: *“The criteria weren’t clear enough”* and *“Why did we rely on someone external to talk about the feedback”* and even *“I didn’t like any aspect of this”*. These comments were associated with lack of satisfaction generally with the 360 degree feedback experience.

By being put off at the basic ‘process’ stage, these participants were unable to engage with the factors that provide confidence and assurance – support, guidance and a clear link to a broader HR or organisational process. But once over the initial hurdles of implementation (reason for doing it, process and instrument design) the success of the 360 degree process then seems to become dependent upon the presence or absence of these additional factors and the interplay between them.

If the perceived significance of the 360 degree feedback is not itself enough to generate a fully positive perception amongst participants, how do the other factors which play a part

exert their effects? One of the features of the more successful case studies, Finance Company 1, was the presence of a facilitator with whom the feedback is discussed and debated. Although an external coach is sometimes the agent for this, the presence of the participant's manager appears to make a difference and in other company settings this was used to good effect, such as with the Security Company. The better the relationship with the manager, the more valuable this dialogue appeared to be (notwithstanding the manager's ability or training in running such discussions). There were comments such as "*I talked to my boss of my own volition afterwards*" and "*I've already set up an informal meeting with my boss*" that occurred in several cases and these comments suggest an eagerness to have a productive discussion. In fact, if the manager is less skilled in the facilitation area, the relationship appears to become more important – participants get more out of the dialogue with a less skilled manager if their relationship is positive. As one participant in the Retail organisation put it: "*It's good to be out of work mode for a bit and talk about my career*". This was a sentiment shared by people from different case studies.

From these findings there is evidence that this is indeed an underlying effect in enhancing an individual's engagement with the 360 degree process. A good relationship means that goal-setting is more likely to be considered more carefully and that the goals will have more relevance to the participant because of the quality of the dialogue that preceded it.

The participants in the case-study organisations which felt less positive, such as some of those in finance company 2 and the mapping agency, either did not have feedback meetings with their line manager or they had less constructive meetings with them. From the mapping agency there were comments such as: "*Without my manager backing the process I was never going to get out of it what I should*" and : "*He did not know how to give feedback so that while the information was useful to me, the meeting was less so*". In the case of the Marketing Company, which used 360 degree feedback for appraisal, the relationship factor may be confounded with the formality of the appraisal event, which is intended to be objective and fair to all. The procedural aspects of the appraisal seemed in this case to dominate, resulting in an acceptance of the feedback but, in most cases, no great motivation to act on any specific aspect of it. "*There is a need to formalise the PDP and review progress*", and "*I was concerned about the confidentiality of the feedback and about the hard ratings I got even though throughout the year the informal feedback had been positive*" were examples of the comments from the Marketing Company.

Even when the factors discussed so far (quality of the instrument, significance of the feedback and relationships with the participants' boss) are present, there can still be variance in the reaction of participants. Effective goal-setting may not result in adhering to a development plan, as was the case with several people in the local authority example. Nor will the development plan necessarily ensure subsequent performance improvement, as was evidenced by participants from finance company 2.

If goal-setting is affected by the relationship with the facilitator, what is subsequently involved in encouraging commitment and adherence to a development plan? Support from the organisation is also a factor, by encouraging people to not only recognise the validity of their 360 degree feedback but to go on and take advantage of corporate resource to make performance improvements. This seemed to be particularly so with the Security Company. With the Security Company and Finance Company 1 the perceived links between the purpose of the 360 degree feedback and the benefits to the employing organisation of having a well trained managerial workforce were clear. Interviewees mentioned their perceived advantages of links with the career management provided for them and made comments to suggest that the day-to-day observations upon which 360 degree feedback is a fairer gauge for the organisation to use when deciding on career moves and placements. In exchange, the organisation was felt to provide effective resources for people to use in their development. The provision of career development reviews in the security company and of coaching in Finance 1 were cited in this respect.

With managers working for the Retailer, however, the focus was on succession planning and any development that was deemed necessary before taking up a new appointment would be identified through the 360 degree feedback. The discussion would be with the participant's line manager and the regional manager (boss' boss). Participant comments were accepting of this as 360 degree feedback's primary purpose and appeared to support the mechanism for using the information. People mentioned that they were supportive of this '*snapshot approach to looking at potential promotees*' and were also satisfied with the need to 're-take' their 360 degree feedback to show when they were ready for promotion. In this way the instrument is positively perceived as a measurement tool.

The findings suggest that the emerging relationship between factors is hierarchical: the greatest benefit from the process (and hence the greatest degree of satisfaction from participants) comes from the sequential effects of several factors. And also their order of

appearance to the participant seems to be important. They exert their influence apparently in combination. For example, those case-study organisations that had poorer apparent relationships between participant and boss (Mapping Agency, Finance Company 2, and Local Authority for instance, where comments were indicative of not trusting those who received the information or of lack of faith in their managers' ability to carry out an effective review or be interested in doing so) had people who appreciated the organisational support they could tap into but their overall motivation appeared diminished by the lack of dialogue with the immediate boss and the consequent lack of clarity and relevance of the goals that they set. So in this case, the relationship issue affects subsequent 360 degree feedback related activities.

In other cases, participants in other organisations such as the Service Company and the Marketing Company could see the significance of the reason they were being given 360 degree feedback but, when it came to the next stages, were less engaged by their organisations' follow-up and support for development planning. Marketing Company's participants made remarks such as "*There is a need to formalise the PDPs and to review progress*" and "*You probably need to set aside half a day to cover this with your manager and work out what to do with the results.*". With the service company some comments shared the view represented by one participant: "*Big development things....activities ....are actually very difficult to fit in.*" The significance alone was not enough to fully engage people with the entire process and the later stages were less consequently effective.

Possibly the least potent combination of all the factors was exemplified by the Mapping Agency. The importance of the 360 degree feedback was regarded by most interviewees as slight, although several interviewees alluded to it as having some potential. The awareness that it was being offered for general development purposes and not linked to any overall organisational scheme did not have a motivational effect (it was therefore not perceived as particularly significant. Attitudes of line managers were also cited as being unstimulating or even negative. From the views of the mapping agency and the local authority it seems that if negative aspects of the factors discussed thus far are felt, then the process can actually be damaging for general morale, trust and development. That is, a poor 360 degree feedback experience can actually be damaging in a general way.

Within these same organisations there were people, but few in number, who did feel that the 360 degree feedback was a productive exercise and these individuals appeared to have

stronger personal feedback orientation and were able to look at their feedback as a useful profile of performance gaps which could be addressed through an improvement programme. But in this kind of organisational setting, although the support from the organisation is available, individuals in this case would need to identify and negotiate the appropriate actions. The onus would therefore be on personal motivation and this, being a personality attribute, will be present to different degree amongst any group of individuals, so we would expect only partial take-up.

Given that the Mapping Agency 360 degree feedback project had been linked to the introduction of a formal development programme, its failure to attract positive evaluative comments can be considered a missed opportunity for them.

The presence in other case-studies of similar conditions and issues but with the addition of better communication around the introduction of the 360 degree feedback appears to provide a much greater incentive and impetus for behavioural change. Once engaged with the process, the supporting factors, of trust, dialogue, culture, purpose and support, then interact to provide the positive developmental framework around participants' efforts. With the Mapping Agency the poor 'positioning' and communication of 360 degree feedback possibly affected the degree of trust and opportunity for dialogue and, combined with lack of clarity over the real purpose and value of the process, no amount of available support would stimulate an overall positive reaction to the 360 degree feedback experience of participants.

### **Summary of between-case analyses**

The between-case analysis so far is suggesting that a good start to the development of an eventual model would be to look at the combined effect of certain factors as they affect the different stages of the 360 degree feedback process. There appear to be by two major influences:

- (1) environmental or cultural factors which are indicated by themes emerging from the interviews (such as degrees of trust, support and interaction between feedback participants and the feedback facilitators). These can be described as cultural since they provide the contextual differences in organisational climate that can differ between one organisation and the next.
- (2) Personal orientation towards receiving feedback.

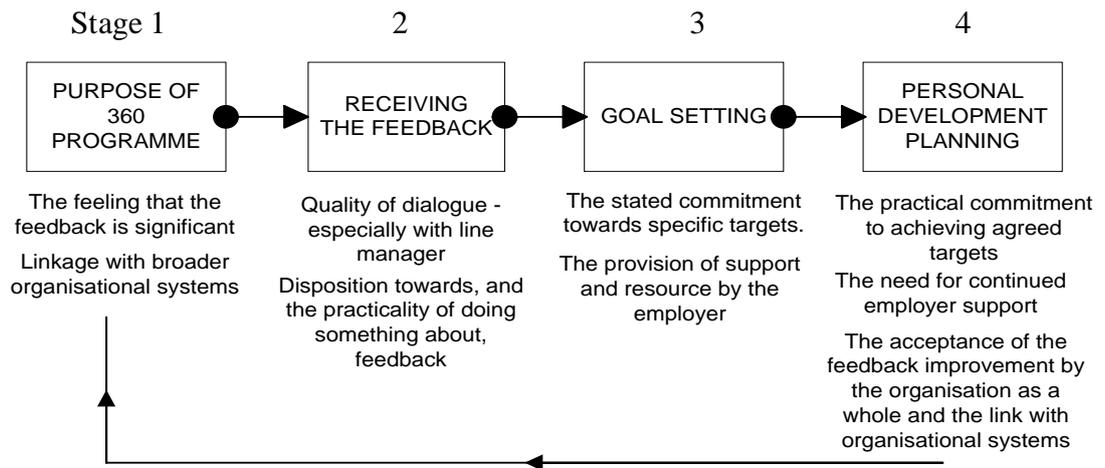
## **Implications for the research question of the within-case-study and between-case study analyses**

The within-case analysis generated nine themes which seem to be particularly significant to people's reactions to 360 degree feedback. Apart from 'disposition to feedback' which is a characteristic of the individual, each of the themes represents an aspect of the conditions or environment in which 360 degree feedback takes place. The themes have emerged through positive as well as negative comments made by interviewees as they described their experiences. The nine themes are:

1. Trust
2. Support
3. Purpose and significance of feedback
4. Ongoing development and learning
5. Relationships with boss or facilitator
6. Dialogue
7. Disposition to feedback
8. Data Collection (the instrument)
9. Organisational culture

NOTE: This is not a ranked list. No quantitative assessment of theme occurrence was made – the grounded theory approach of working towards 'saturation' was adopted, rather than counting or any other way of measuring.

The inter-case comparisons suggested that the environment necessary for a positive perception of 360 degree feedback consists of a series of these themes acting in combination to motivate the participant. The series suggested here is linear, eventually leading to the completion of a personal development plan (PDP) followed by performance improvement. The sequence of stages works best when it is also linked to an organisational process, such as succession planning or career development. The perceived reason for doing the 360 degree feedback must be considered significant by participants. This initial acceptance provides the impetus to take the participant through to the next stages of the process, which are outlined in figure 19 below.



**Figure 19 Proposed links between the four stages of 360 degree feedback and the themes from the interviews**

In figure 19, the first of the four numbered stages represents participants' initial exposure to the 360 degree feedback programme or event. To engage participants so that they go on to use the feedback effectively, their reactions to this exposure must be that they regard it as important enough to take part in (the particular theme that emerged from the research is number 3 in the list of themes above: *'the purpose and significance of the feedback'*). This is represented as box 1 of figure 19, and the note below the box states that one way of ensuring a perception of importance is by linking the 360 degree feedback with an important organisational system, which may be succession planning, appraisal or a well-regarded management development programme.

Boxes, 2, 3 and 4 are the subsequent stages of use of the feedback and beneath each box in figure 19 are some notes describing the ways in which the activity represented by the box may be enhanced. Box 2, 'receiving the feedback' for example is perceived to be made more productive when dialogue with the line manager is possible.

Within my set of case-study organisations, the 'red' category failed to achieve high enough impact in most of these stages. The local authority, finance company 2, and the mapping agency all clearly signposted the purpose of the 360 degree feedback as a diagnostic component of further development activity, but the feedback facilitation, goal-setting and

creation of development plans did not have sufficient impact with participants to maintain the momentum.

By looking at the three 'green' case-study organisations that responded with the most positive views of the 360 degree feedback experience, we can see that even with these, no single organisation has all four stages operating at full effectiveness all of the time. But each of the three 'green' case-studies show strong properties in two or more of the four areas of the 360 degree feedback process. These strengths seem to act as 'enablers' to develop the overall environment for a productive 360 degree feedback experience.

How the three 'green' case-study organisations are perceived to work well along the four stages of the feedback process are shown in Table 4 below. For the Security Company, for example, there were felt to be two particularly strong stages:

- the clarity and importance of the purpose for having 360 degree feedback (Stage 1 in Figure 19 above) and
- the dialogue with the boss afterward (Stage 2 in Figure 19)

These were generally felt by the participants of that case-study to be particularly significant features which have a positive impact on their acceptance and overall response to 360 degree feedback.

For Finance Company 1 it is the depth and quality of the post-feedback support which appeared to be significant through facilitation, help with development and ongoing support.

For the Retailer the motivation provided by the link with succession planning and promotion made stage 1 a strong feature. The possibility of having second tries at the 360 degree feedback if the first feedback was not completely favourable was seen as a useful way of getting people to the right standard and then giving the support to their personal development planning and actions.

The particular strengths, as perceived by participants in each of the most positive (green category) case-study organisations, are summarised in Table 4 below.

ORGANISATION	STAGES OF THE FEEDBACK PROCESS			
	1 PURPOSE	2 RECEIVING FEEDBACK	3 GOAL SETTING	4 PDP
Security Company	The 360 feedback is clearly linked to career development	Participants saw the importance of dialogue with boss and given that opportunity	<i>Carried out, but not commented upon as significant</i>	<i>Carried out, but not commented upon as significant</i>
Finance Company 1	<i>Not remarked upon as particularly significant</i>	Participants saw the importance of facilitation discussions with a coach and given the opportunity	People were motivated by the support they received around further development	Development planning was supported and advised upon by a coach
Retailer	Seen as important because 360 feedback was used for succession planning, which affects promotions and career progression	<i>Not remarked upon as particularly significant</i>	<i>Not remarked upon as particularly significant</i>	People valued the chance of a second attempt at getting better feedback

**Table 4      The three ‘green’ category case-studies and the strengths they are seen to possess across the four stages of the feedback process**

These three organisations are the ones in this study in which participants felt most positive about 360 degree feedback. The table above shows that not all four stages need to be remarked upon for the overall perception of 360 degree feedback to be positive. Despite some of the stages not cited as being particularly significant, the factors that they do possess in strength may apply ‘momentum’ to the system and generate a positive overall response from participants.

In fact, even in these three ‘green category’ organisations, there were criticisms of some aspects of the 360 degree feedback process. For example, the Security Company did not have a strong tradition of performance feedback (with avoidance of difficult conversations by some managers and with others a tendency not to address issues at the right time – the ‘*we don’t spoon-feed people*’ attitude cited in the findings). Although the 360 degree feedback was discussed between participants and their bosses and felt to be a positive experience, line managers were still regarded by many participants (and themselves) as being in need of training in giving and discussing feedback. Despite this, the overall process was deemed satisfactory by those involved. The break with tradition by the encouragement for participants and line managers to sit down together to discuss development issues was seen as a significant and positive step. And although goal-setting *per se* was not discussed in detail during the research interviews, it was seen to happen in an informal way: the dialogue at the review meeting generated a number of development

ideas for both participant and boss to consider. The career development programme then acted as the framework for onward development.

Finance Company 1, another of the three best regarded organisations, did not have a strong tradition of trust and openness in the organisation as a whole, perhaps because of its turbulent recent history of takeovers and its ownership by different parent banks. But, for this programme, the provision by the company of an external coach, who would work with individuals on their development plans and on the 360 degree feedback, seems to have been appreciated by participants as a way of moving forward.

The third company in the 'green' category was the retail company, and here the feedback meeting was very formal, being linked to promotion and having not only the immediate boss but also the regional manager and sometimes a representative from HR in attendance. But the ensuing development planning and preparations for advancement made this formality seemed like a price worth paying to those participants involved.

Given that there are comparatively weak areas even in the most successful examples amongst these case-studies, this suggests that if all four stages were to be strong, then their influence on the whole 360 degree feedback system would have a proportionally higher motivational and productive impact on participants.

### **Summary of the within- and between-case analyses**

The *within-case* analysis generated a list of nine likely factors. Consideration of the *between-case* comparisons suggests that these nine themes can be further organised into those that are linked to the four process steps of figure 19 (page 161 above).

1. The significance of the purpose of the 360 degree feedback
2. The process of receiving the feedback,
3. The use of the feedback for goal-setting, and
4. The activities around Personal Development Planning.

This is likely to be an oversimplification, since each theme may not confine its influence to just one of the stages of the process. The aim of this attempt to map themes to process stages is to identify where they may have their greatest impact. The themes are arranged under their process stages in the following list (overleaf):

## **1 Purpose of 360 degree feedback**

- The design criteria of the 360 feedback instrument (the Data Collection theme)
- The purpose of the feedback ( which is the Purpose and Significance theme but also includes the Ongoing Development and Learning theme)

## **2 Receiving the feedback**

- The Trust theme.
- How people react to their feedback (the Disposition to Feedback theme)

## **3 Use of the feedback for goal-setting**

- The dialogue with somebody who can discuss the results (combining the Relationships and Dialogue themes)

## **4 Development Planning**

- The Support theme
- The Organisational Culture of the employing organisation

This provides a ‘working model’ which I will use as the basis of discussion in Chapter Five where I consider the implications of the interactions between these factors for my research question.

In the next chapter I take this analysis of the findings and discuss them in terms of the objectives of this research study and what is already known from the literature. Possible theoretical explanations for participants’ reactions to 360 degree feedback will be considered.

## Chapter Five Discussion and Theory building

*A crowd of difficulties will have occurred to the reader. Some of them are so grave that to this day I can never reflect upon them without being staggered; but, to the best of my judgment, the greater number are only apparent, and those that are real are not, I think, fatal to my theory.*

Charles Darwin, 'On The Origin of Species'

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter draws together the findings and their analysis and suggests a theoretical model that will explain variance in responses to 360 degree feedback. The chapter develops the model from the findings by using the results to identify additional theoretical frameworks that underpin some of the factors of the study and then integrating the results with these theories. The requirement for a second literature review, in order to understand these specific theories and consider the mechanisms for their integration, was undertaken.

#### A review of the findings

This research project set out to discover the difference between 360 degree feedback experiences that are valued by participants and those that are not. Many of the research findings are directly relevant to this question and are listed below.

##### 1. *Variation in the 360 degree feedback instruments*

The findings suggest that there are few comments about the 360 degree feedback instrument if the design and working of the instrument are good. It tends to get noticed when there are problems with it. In this way, the instrument can be regarded as a 'hygiene factor'. Hygiene factors in Herzberg's theory of motivation (Herzberg, 1968) are those aspects of work which, when not present or at the right level, cause dissatisfaction. But when they are present, or at a sufficient level, they do not in themselves create satisfaction.

##### 2. *Variation across the participants themselves*

The participants were middle and senior managers whose prior exposure to 360 degree feedback varied. Some had not been involved in 360 degree feedback in any capacity before and others had had multiple exposure to it, either in one organisation or in several.

Participants also varied in their natural predisposition to feedback, their willingness to take part, their disposition towards learning and education, and their relationships with those who would be giving them ratings. Disposition to feedback is a factor which determines how people view the 360 degree feedback experience and this is discussed further in this chapter when describing how people respond to either positive or negative feedback. Disposition to feedback was also seen from the findings to be moderated by the environment in which the feedback is given, and this is a cultural consideration, also considered further in this chapter.

### *3. Variation in the nature of the feedback received*

In each of the case study organisations, the 360 degree feedback was based on a questionnaire containing questions using rating scales for rating behavioural indicators. Narrative comments were also collected and these were more general and open ended, asking for comments about overall strengths and weaknesses. The main source of variation (of the type of feedback obtained) here was in the differences between the different organisational competency models. Overall, however, they are similar in structure, number of questions, and in the competency areas they explored (which were around personal and interpersonal effectiveness, commercial orientation, and cognitive abilities). Given the similarity of these measures in each case it is possible to see in the findings how disposition to feedback and culture affect participants' perceptions of the process. Reactions to the feedback, in terms of the receptivity to the need to change, were seen to be affected by the participants' agreement with their behavioural ratings from others (by assessing the quality of the question design and by comparing their self-ratings with the rest) Once the feedback was accepted, whether or not anything is done with it depends on the nature of the environment of support and this is explored further in this chapter.

### *4. Variation in the purpose for which 360 degree feedback is used*

The case-study organisations had different reasons for putting managers through 360 degree feedback. These reasons were: for annual appraisal (one case), career and development review (one case), coaching for development (one case), as part of a management development programme (four cases), for occasional, informal development (one case), and for occasional promotion and development (two cases). The findings suggest that the purpose needs to be considered significant by the participants in order for them to then take advantage of the feedback and subsequent development opportunity.

### 5. *Variation across the organisations*

There were six private sector cases, two public and one third-sector case. There was variation in size amongst the group of private sector businesses and between the two public sector cases. The findings suggest that although overall culture varies according to type of organisation and affects perceptions of 360 degree feedback, there are some specific aspects of culture which are particularly significant. These are discussed in this chapter.

### 6. *Variation across the management of the process*

Cases varied in the ways in which the 360 degree feedback was offered (obligatory, voluntary, formal and informal) and in how much choice people had in saying who would rate them. These 'project management' aspects seem, from the findings, to be secondary factors and do not themselves 'make the difference'. What does appear to be important is how the feedback is provided and whether or not this is associated with guidance and discussion. Furthermore, if the discussion opportunity is provided there is the question of whether this is facilitated by the participant's boss, and internal trainer or coach, or an external facilitator. This has a bearing on point (7) below.

### 7. *Variation across the nature of the discussion following the 360 degree feedback*

In some cases, participants discussed their feedback with their line manager. In other cases the feedback discussion was provided by a coach or facilitator, either as part of a management development programme or as a service to aid with personal development planning. The involvement of the manager and the quality of that discussion are significant factors in participant perceptions of the 360 degree process.

I have looked at the findings from this combination of circumstances and environments in the light of some of the issues and theories from the literature review. This process has led to the model I describe in the latter part of this chapter. The main elements of the model are described in the following section.

## **5.2 The main components of a model for explaining perceptions of 360 degree feedback**

In this Chapter I consider those aspects of my findings that seem to relate most closely to the research question. That is, those findings which may identify the factors which make the difference to people's experiences of 360 degree feedback. From this review I will also

examine those additional areas of the literature that are pertinent to these factors and which will contribute to the theory I will develop.

The intra- and inter-case-study analyses have suggested that the themes which emerged from the case-study analysis can be arranged across four process steps that occur with 360 degree feedback (see page 148). This is repeated below:

### **The purpose of the 360 degree feedback**

- The design criteria of the 360 feedback instrument (the Data Collection theme)
- The purpose of the feedback ( which is the Purpose and Significance theme but also includes the Ongoing Development and Learning theme)

### **Receiving the feedback**

- The Trust theme.
- How people react to their feedback (the Disposition to Feedback theme)

### **Use of the feedback for goal-setting**

- The dialogue with somebody who can discuss the results (combining the Relationships and Dialogue themes)

### **Development Planning**

- The Support theme
- The Organisational Culture of the employing organisation

The *themes* are based on the topics that emerged out of the discussions with the interviewees. Some of the topics had similar properties and could therefore be classified into these specific themes, which I have defined above. The possibility that these themes are indicators of the *factors* which influence or determine people's reactions to 360 degree feedback is examined in this Chapter.

The framework above contains elements of organisational feedback culture (such as perceived levels of trust, support, and relationships) and also personal reactions to being given feedback. It is reasonable to use this interaction between the cultural and the personal alongside another regularly occurring factor, the 360 degree process itself (its

accessibility, design features, competency basis, timing and so on), as the foundation of a model for explaining why 360 degree feedback can be perceived in different ways by participants.

In addition to the literature on 360 degree feedback reviewed in Chapter Two there are studies which are relevant to the factors that emerged from the case-study research above. That literature will be discussed in this chapter insofar as it relates to affective reaction as a result of perceptions of 360 degree feedback experiences. For example, the concept of 'trust', which was significant in many of the case studies of this thesis, is considered within the body of research around Organisational Justice Perception, which also includes the idea of employee "voice" or the possibility of having views heard. This literature provides further theoretical insight into the way this aspect of culture may create the conditions necessary for positive perceptions of 360 degree feedback. Organisational Justice Perception is discussed in a later section.

Another area of research activity relates to the nature of support for personal development planning. The case study organisations which showed the most positive attitudes to 360 degree feedback generally had strong and visible support mechanisms in place, even though they took different forms. These fall under the subject of Perceived Organisational Support, discussed later in this Chapter. Another theoretical framework which merits consideration here is that of Leader-Member Exchange, which describes the different relationships that can develop between subordinates and managers. The case studies of my research cited the need for effective facilitation of the feedback discussion. Where this was done by the participant's boss, reactions appeared to be most positive. Leader-Member Exchange is also further discussed in this Chapter.

Before reviewing these cultural variables I discuss the factor which determines the way in which performance feedback is received and acted upon by individuals. I have described this factor above as 'disposition to feedback' and there are two theories of performance feedback which are particularly relevant to this, which are discussed in the next section.

### **5.3 Theories of Performance Feedback**

How feedback on performance leads to improvements in people's performance levels has been investigated over the years but there has yet to emerge any unifying or widely

accepted theory (London & Smither, 2002). The phenomenon of ‘feedback’ falls within two major domains of the management development field: it is considered an aspect of ‘communication’ and it is also an integral element of ‘learning’. As a result there are many assertions, checklists and advisory texts in circulation. An example of such an assertion is: *‘People do not learn unless they are given feedback on the results of their actions.’* (Stewart, in Mumford (1991:50). And there are many checklists and suggestions about how the feedback is best delivered and received (for example, CIPD, 2008; Ward, 1997)). These ideas, based as they appear to be on common sense and good practice, have, over the years, become regarded as trusted axioms.

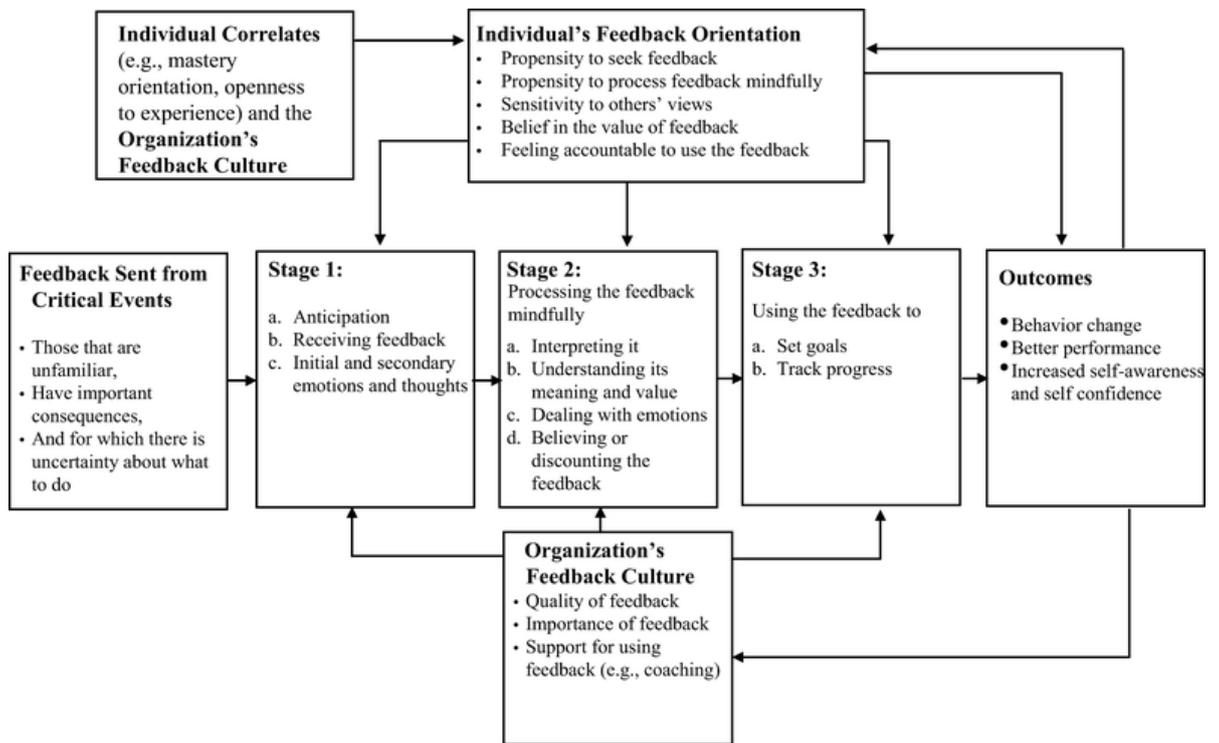
A manager’s job generally requires giving positive and negative feedback to subordinates to maintain good performance and encourage improvement in those areas that are lacking. This clearly draws upon its own set of skills and competencies if it is to be done effectively. Avoidance of giving negative feedback is a possible tactic by those without the feedback skills. The provision of formalised settings, such as appraisals and career reviews allow feedback to be given and received in a relatively controlled setting. 360 degree feedback provides some of the data used in these reviews and the case studies described in this thesis illustrate some of these settings.

The object of this thesis is to establish the conditions under which this specific form of feedback, 360 degree feedback, has the most positive effect. Some understanding of the current theories that try to explain how feedback operates is therefore needed, in order to appreciate the circumstances under which people experience the 360 degree process.

### **Feedback Orientation and Performance Management**

London and Smither (2002) encourage a long-term perspective in their feedback model of ‘person-environment’ interaction. They outline the main features of ‘Feedback Orientation’ (describing the reaction of an individual) and the ‘Feedback Culture’ of the organisation and suggest that these dimensions interact to determine an individual’s overall receptivity to feedback.

Figure 20 illustrates this model, where the different components of the feedback system work together over time to bring about change in response to the initial feedback event.



**Figure 20 Role of feedback orientation, culture and critical events in performance management (from London and Smither (2002:82))**

According to this theory, feedback orientation describes an individual's reactions and responses to feedback. The theory also treats this construct as dynamic – the level of feedback orientation can alter as a result of an individual's experience of the organisation's feedback culture, which is itself a result of organisational practices. These practices reflect the value placed on feedback and the investment in supporting its use. For example, an indication of strong feedback culture is the provision of coaching for its managers by an organisation. Whilst this intervention can begin to improve people's feedback orientation over time, another proposal of the theory is that those who already have high levels of feedback orientation respond particularly positively to coaching. And over time, the coaching activity cascades through the organisation and strengthens feedback culture.

This theory suggests some processes which affect how people learn from performance feedback and how they use the learning to improve their performance. The dynamics of these interactions seem to be important considerations in the design of performance management systems, which provide the organisational framework for people to receive, absorb and use feedback.

## **The individual's response to receiving feedback**

360 degree feedback is a very specific type of feedback, grounded, as mentioned earlier in this thesis, in the philosophy and practice of survey feedback, which occurs within a performance management framework. The framework is one of the variables that determines its effectiveness and the case studies cover several of these applications (appraisal, development, succession planning). But this study is attempting a more detailed understanding of how people react to this particular type of feedback and how these reactions can lead, or not lead, to a performance improvement. The case study organisations of this project which showed particularly positive attitudes to 360 degree feedback amongst participants did not all use it for the same application. Of the top three cases (in Table 3, Chapter 4) there were three separate applications for the feedback.

There are two closely related theories which attempt to explain response to feedback. One of these is goal-setting theory (Locke and Latham, 2002), the other is Feedback Intervention Theory (DeNisi and Kluger, 1996). It is argued below that, in organisational settings, Feedback Intervention Theory is more specific to individual task performance in contrast to the more general and broader applications of goal-setting theory. Therefore, in helping to understand perceptions towards 360 degree feedback, Feedback Intervention Theory offers more scope for addressing the research question.

### **Feedback Intervention Theory**

Theories of performance improvement (such as that of Latham and Locke, 1979) emphasise the importance of the setting of goals and the role of feedback in generating motivation for achieving them. The theory of Locke and Latham has led to a general agreement amongst practitioners that feedback and goal-setting are important antecedents of performance improvement. It is unwise to make this assumption however, without taking context into account. The studies of Locke and Latham were carried out on job roles that were monotonous, repetitive, and physically tiring for workers. Some authors (for example Furnham, 1997: p. 265) have observed that goals and standards can actually limit performance. In such cases it is suggested that people attain goals to avoid the consequences of not attaining them, rather than attaining them to receive positive reinforcement.

It is not my intention in this thesis to evaluate the different opinions around the purpose, types and effects of goal-setting interventions. The role of 360 degree feedback in providing direction, motivation and clarity about people's development needs is my focus. The perceptions people have about the process may depend upon their view of the process as a whole and this will be a strand of my investigation.

Early theories that specifically look at feedback, such as Control Theory (Carver & Scheier, 1981) argued that people look for discrepancies between their own behaviour and some sort of standard or goal. Thus the act of goal-setting described above is an integral component of any feedback system that intends to encourage improvement in performance. On the face of it, 360 degree feedback is an ideal contributor to this: it shows people gaps between how they see their performance and how others see it. And the bigger the gap (if it is a 'negative' gap), the stronger the urge to close it, according to Control Theory.

London and Smither (1995) wondered if the discrepancy was regarded as more significant if it lay between the self-ratings and the ratings of subordinates in particular or if it lay between self rating and the other categories of rater. Studies such as those of Atwater *et al* (1998) indicate that ratings from people's managers, understandably, carry more weight ('understandably' because of the power relationship). Since London and Smither's original longitudinal study there have been many studies on self/co-worker agreement and these were referred to in the literature review, but there are still no unifying theories or generalisable tenets, suggesting that reliance on 360 degree data as an objective source of statistical data may lead to misleading or bland conclusions. It may be better used as a prompt for useful dialogue between a manager and subordinate or a manager and a coach or facilitator, as with the Security Company. If this is the case, then perception of the process becomes an important factor in encouraging or discouraging performance-improvement planning.

A useful feedback model, one that includes what people do or don't do with feedback under different conditions, has been proposed by Kluger and DeNisi (2002), which extends their earlier Feedback Intervention Theory (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996). This is a particularly significant theory for the current study for two reasons. One is that it is based on a meta-analysis of a large number of studies on performance feedback in organisational settings. The other is because Feedback Intervention Theory is designed to be specific to

task individual performance in contrast to the more general and broader applications of goal-setting theory, for instance (McCally, 2003:1152). The theory provides an explanatory mechanism: feedback directs attention to specific levels of performance and different responses are activated by different levels of feedback. In this way Feedback Intervention Theory can be considered a sub-theory (of goal-setting theory) that is appropriate to individual task applications. As a result, Feedback Intervention Theory allows for more specific interpretation of the findings of the current study.

The theory has five basic assumptions:

1. *Behaviour is regulated by a comparison of feedback with a goal or standard.*

This simply states that when we notice a gap between feedback and some goal, we usually try to reduce that gap. The ‘gap’ can be of different types: the feedback may identify a hitherto unsuspected area for development or it may confirm known performance shortfalls.

2. *Goals or standards are arranged hierarchically when deciding on goal commitment.*

The highest level is the level of ‘self’, where goals relate to self-concept.

The next is the ‘task motivation’ level, where goals relate to actual task performance.

The lowest level is the ‘task learning level’ which are goals linked to details of actions in performing the task.

3. *Attention is limited, so only those differences between feedback and standards that receive attention will regulate behaviour.*

4. *Attention is normally directed to a moderate level in the hierarchy.*

5. *Feedback interventions change the locus of attention and so affect behaviour.*

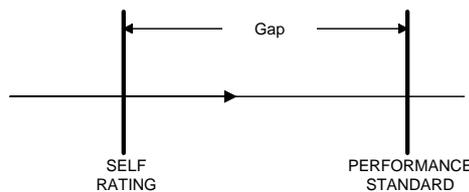
So the ‘level’ of goal that people are normally focused on is the ‘task motivation’ level, but feedback can direct focus to any of the three levels, depending on the kind of feedback being given.

In summary, people tend not to change anything after feedback if they think the goal is not important, or that it is irrelevant, or when the perceived discrepancy between their current performance level and the intended level is only slight, or when they believe they have no control or likelihood of changing their current position or behaviour.

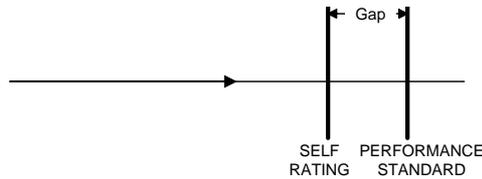
Any motivation to change behaviour will come from a perception that there is a significant discrepancy between the required performance level and that of the actual

performance level. One function of negative feedback from others is that it raises awareness of the fact that there is a gap (this assumes the ‘task motivation’ level of feedback). Feedback Intervention Theory proposes that motivation to achieve a goal is generated by the perception of a significant gap. Self appraisal alone may not provide the information that demonstrates that gap. The addition of critical feedback from other perspectives, as is provided by 360 degree feedback, can provide additional motivation. This is illustrated by figure 21. Parts (a) and (b) of figure 21 summarise the essence of Feedback Intervention Theory: the perceived gap motivates improvement. Part (c) is my suggestion that enhancement of the reaction to feedback may be provided by the introduction of alternative perspectives, such as those obtained through 360 degree feedback.

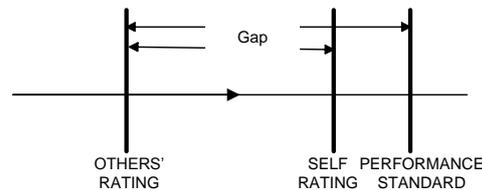
- (a) *FIT: self-assessed feedback at the task motivation level is negative*  
 The performance standard represents the goal.  
 The negative self-rating provides the motivation to improve



- (b) *When the performance gap is small*  
 The negative self-rating is not considered significant  
 There is little motivation to improve



- (c) *When critical assessments from others are included (360 degree feedback)*  
 The response is now to the gap between self/standard and the others' feedback  
 The motivation is provided by the negative feedback of others



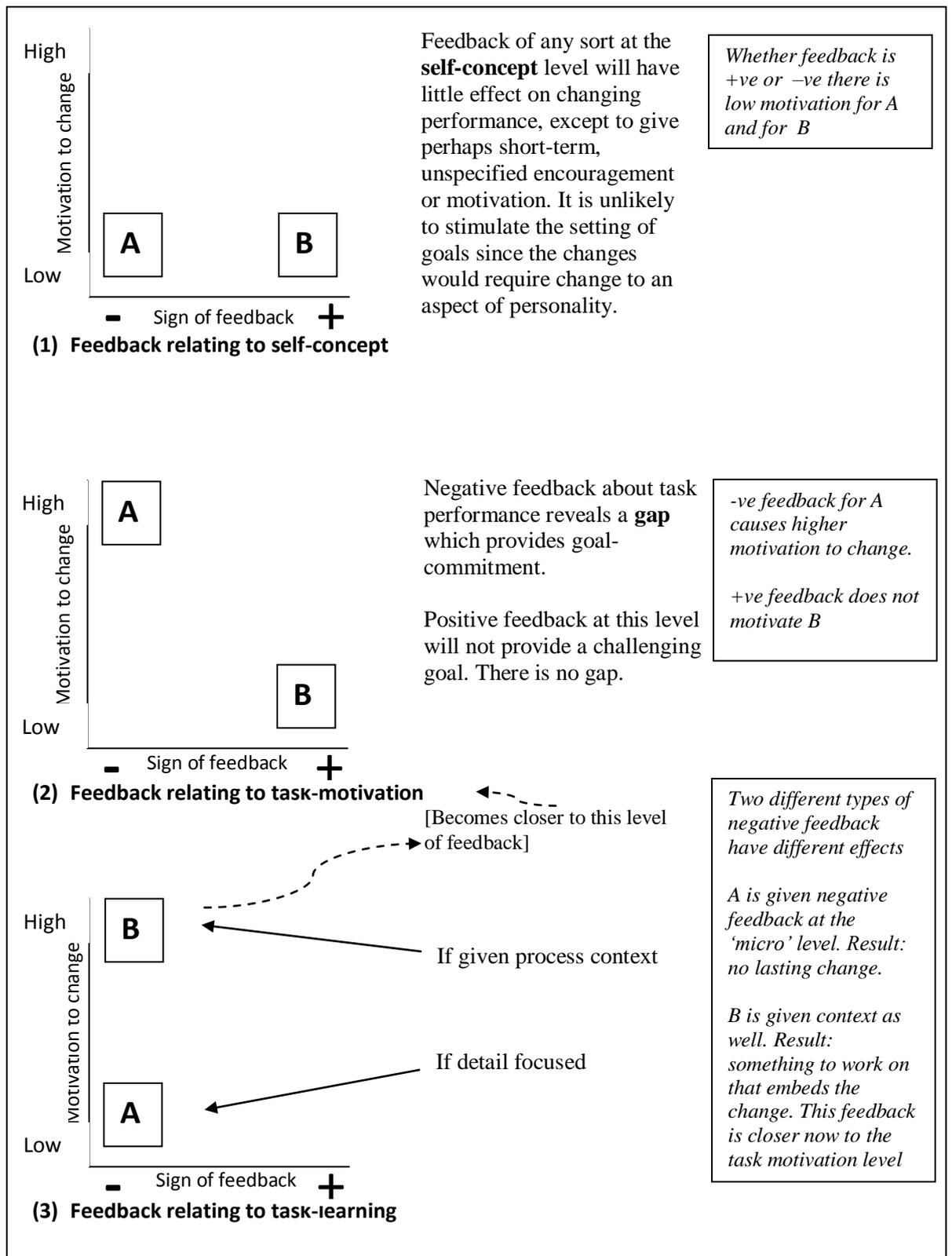
**Figure 21 How 360 degree feedback and FIT bring about the motivation to improve performance (FIT = Feedback Intervention Theory)**

Negative feedback may also simply confirm that there is a discrepancy in performance large enough to merit an improvement plan. But again, the level of feedback is best aimed at the 'task-motivation' level since however big the discrepancy may be, there may be little to motivate change if a personality factor is the root cause.

The role of positive feedback may not be to bring about change directly. It may be to add the extra motivational drive to create a development plan. It may also be that this type of feedback is of greater significance in organisational settings where the perception of 360 degree feedback is less positive, where the motivation from the perceived performance discrepancy may not by itself be enough.

The added complexity of the different combinations of negative and positive feedback is considered below, where I examine the interplay of factors that create the optimum conditions for the application of 360 degree feedback. Although this (FIT) theory suggests that the response to feedback can vary according to the level at which it is directed (self, task-motivation or task-learning), another variable is whether the feedback is favourable or critical. Figure 22 below depicts the possible combinations of the effects of these variables.

/continued over



**Figure 22 Possible effects of 'sign of feedback' on performance at each 'level of attention' (A and B represent individuals receiving the feedback).**

*Explanation of the figure is given below*

In Figure 22, points A and B represent the recipients' reactions to their feedback. The position on the chart of A and B is determined by the three categorical variables below:

1. The 'sign' of the feedback, i.e. whether it is positive or negative
2. How motivated A or B are to change or develop as a result (high or low motivation)
3. The type of feedback according to the classification by 'Feedback Intervention Theory' (self or task, and if task is the focus whether it is at the motivation level or the learning level)

The three categories of the third variable are presented as the three separate charts for ease of comparison and interpretation.

Figure 22 suggests that some kinds of feedback, whether positive or negative, pitched at the wrong 'level', can result in a low motivation to change. For example, being told that you need to be more outgoing (which is often influenced by personality characteristics), or being told that you are strong in an area of management and given the general advice that you can 'build on that strength'. These messages are difficult for people to act upon in any practical way.

Being able to reliably predict the likely outcome from a feedback intervention would be useful, not only for ensuring that the feedback will lead to performance improvement, but also to avoid the drop in motivation and performance that may also ensue if feedback is targeted at the wrong level of focus.

Feedback interventions at the level of 'self-concept' run the risk of reducing effectiveness. As McCalley (2003) says '*...attitude and task performance can be at odds in situations where attention to task performance, goals and feedback is critical and is subject to distraction by more global thoughts of the individual's self perception.*' Personal and social identity, as components of self-concept, may be affected by feedback that does not affirm self concept. Attention is likely to be directed towards this discrepancy (Markus and Wurf, 1987) and distract participants from the performance improvement that 360 degree feedback intends.

The task motivation level is the most fruitful level of attention for feedback. Here feedback is directed purely on task performance and a person would see an opportunity to reduce the gap between actual and required *performance*. For example, a salesperson who is not going to achieve targets at the current rate of business development can look at improvements in sales activity, resource allocation, marketing, delegation skills and so on. So a focus on achieving the task at hand should result in improved performance over time. 360 degree feedback processes which take behavioural competency indicators as the dimensions being rated stand a good chance of providing participants with the kind of information they can act upon. A behavioural indicator, such as “*Takes time to give positive and negative feedback to individuals to help them perform better*” provides the giver of the feedback a way of giving the recipient a clear idea of the nature of the area to improve and also guidance about how to go about improving.

At the lowest level of feedback intervention, task-learning, the resultant goals that are set tend to focus on detail of performance. For feedback to work effectively at this level, additional process information is needed so that people know how they are going to improve. There is a danger that people can focus on detail at the expense of actual performance. With the salesperson example above, failure to improve sales could cause attention to shift to this level. Typical task-learning interventions here would be to try and improve performance through changing specific methods of approach (smiling, acting friendly etc). This may be difficult to keep up over time (since it is perceived as simply a task) and it may or may not improve performance – such interventions can also distract people from dealing with the actual task by ‘automating’ their behaviour. So the task-learning level of attention may have little effect.

The importance of Feedback Intervention Theory as a moderator of feedback reaction is that it defines the type of feedback that has most benefit to participants (task performance feedback) and explains why other categories of feedback can lead to more complex and less easily predictable outcomes. These other reactions to feedback, especially those which affect the self-esteem and self-concept of participants, although considered by other theories, such as Self-Evaluation Maintenance Theory (Tesser 1988) and Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins 1987), fall outside the scope of this thesis.

## **Implications of these feedback theories for 360 degree feedback**

Understanding the dynamics of the relationship between culture factors and feedback orientation at the organisational, or *macro* level is important if the launch of 360 degree feedback is to be successful. But at the individual, or *micro*-level, where task improvement is the goal, the Feedback Intervention Theory is a useful guide.

I referred to the three ‘levels of attention’ of the Feedback Intervention Theory above, which describe reactions to feedback in general. 360 degree feedback is a singular form of feedback and it is useful to look at the various performance indicators that 360 degree systems use to gauge performance levels.

Questionnaires are often composed of ‘competency statements’ and these statements can elicit reactions at different levels of attention. In a 360 degree setting, specific feedback on certain indicators in a questionnaire can lead to the task learning response. To illustrate this here is a competency statement from a questionnaire used in the Local Authority case study for their 360 degree feedback exercise:

*‘Injects fun and humour where appropriate’*

Raters were asked to rate this on a frequency scale (a ‘1’ for low up to a ‘5’ for high). Low ratings on this item can produce reactions at any of the three levels of attention:

A response at the self-concept level could result in a person either embracing a fundamental personal change or accepting that they ‘do not fit’. At the level of self-concept people’s likely reaction will be to accept that this kind of behaviour is simply not ‘natural’ for them.

At the middle level of the hierarchy, the task-motivation level, the reaction can be quite different. For instance, if the project had been a high pressure and fast moving activity and this feedback was received at the end of it, then it is possible to accept it as valid, understand why, and to do something about it the next time such a task or project crops up. So at the task motivation level you can look at different parts of your profile and of your job and look for links or common threads and work up a strategy for improving that element, amongst others. The answer could be in general communication practice or simply ‘walking the floor’ activity.

At the level of task detail there is again a danger that negative feedback for this statement will lead to a reduction in performance levels. If you see the feedback on this in isolation and do not make links across the entire feedback profile perhaps (maybe looking for a general ‘communication’ explanation), then it is possible to respond simply by trying harder in that particular competency area. To suddenly start introducing ‘fun and humour’ without any sort of track record in this behaviour may not work at all well. Most of the negative remarks about the questionnaires made by individuals within the case study organisations of this project were aimed at the type of questions asked: how they could be answered fairly and how could anything be done about them. Overall, questionnaire design across the case study organisations was of a good standard. Of the case studies the Local Authority had the least effective questions (about integrity, sense of humour and so on). If the feedback is going to need careful explanation and interpretation, then the need for effective facilitation and constructive dialogue is likely to become more important.

#### **5.4 Building the theory to explain what brings about a participant’s positive overall perception of the 360 degree feedback experience**

It appears that an effective design of 360 degree feedback systems needs to take account of two main components:

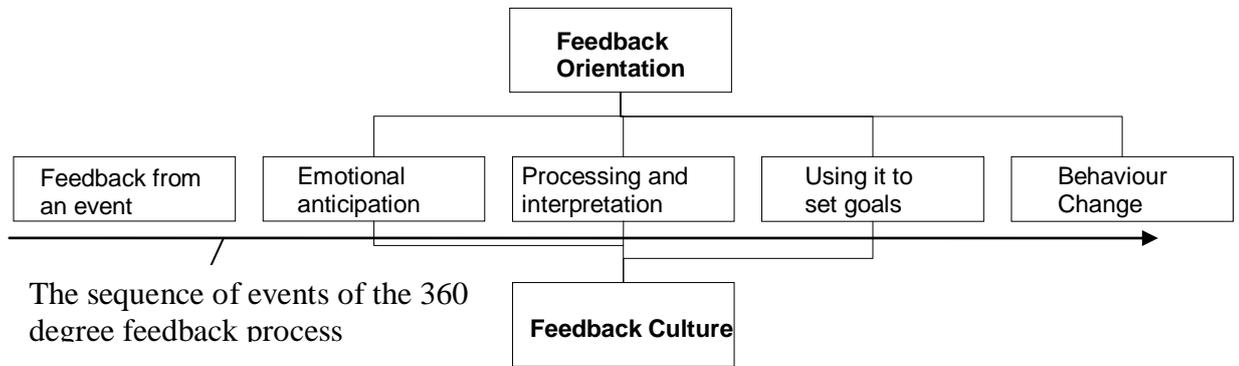
- 1) The interaction between the individual and the environment by the effect of the overall ‘feedback culture’ on an individual’s ‘feedback orientation’ (as suggested by London and Smither (2002)), and
- 2) Individual reactions to feedback according to the nature of the feedback they receive (according to Kluger and DeNisi (2002))

Using my findings within the structure provided by these two performance feedback frameworks I can start to assemble the first parts of a theoretical model that describes reactions to 360 degree feedback.

##### **Stage one of the theory-building: The basic ‘London and Smither model’:**

London and Smither (2002) encouraged a long-term perspective in their feedback model of ‘person-environment’ interaction. Their description of ‘feedback orientation’ (describing

the reaction of an individual) and the ‘feedback culture’ of the organisation suggests that these dimensions interact to determine an individual’s overall receptivity to feedback. The schema in figure 23 below is the main framework of their theory and the basis of my early attempts to locate my findings withing existing theoretical models.



**Figure 23 Schema to illustrate the role of feedback orientation, culture and critical events in performance management (from London and Smither, 2001:82)**

The feedback ‘process’ itself runs along the middle horizontal line and is a sequence of stages running from the initial (significant) feedback to the eventual behaviour change that is the object of the exercise. The emphasis at the start point is that the feedback is ‘significant’. That is, perceived by participants as being an important organisational and personal event.

People experience differing degrees of success at the transitions between each of the five phases along the process line. A well designed and efficient 360 degree feedback system with smooth and attractive (often online) interfaces was clearly appreciated by most users when I interviewed them, especially when it comes to filling in questionnaires and interpreting the information using the reports. But commitment to goals and to changing behaviour is not guaranteed, however good the instrument and programme design. Instrument design seems then to be a ‘hygiene factor’, getting more attention if it isn’t there.

In London and Smither’s model, Feedback Orientation determines the individual’s response to feedback and Feedback Culture describes the set of organisational practices

that people would associate with performance and feedback. Both of these are variables with broad definitions.

Feedback Orientation is a composite set of behavioural and attitudinal factors which is difficult to apply as a predictive factor because of the number of possible variables (King *et al*, 2009). To develop a more practical overall model for 360 degree feedback without trying to include all these variables I have examined the theory described above of 'Feedback Intervention' (Kluger and DeNisi, 2002) which looks specifically at the way in which feedback is most likely to be acted upon and looked at. This should provide a testable way of explaining the reactions described in my findings, and this additional theory helps to deepen understanding of the broader definition of overall Feedback Orientation as described by the model of London and Smither.

### **Stage two of the theory-building: Incorporating Kluger and DeNisi's Feedback Intervention Theory (FIT) and specifying 360 feedback as the starting point**

Initially, my own findings seemed to suggest that a good predictor of affective reaction to 360 degree feedback is to adapt the London and Smither (Stage 1 of my theory-building) model slightly, to incorporate 360 degree feedback as the significant event that comprises the starting point of the feedback process. The significance of the event in the mind of the respondent depends partly upon the purpose of the 360 degree feedback programme and, as discussed above, it was apparent from the interviews that the reason for doing the 360 degree feedback (to provide stand-alone feedback, contribute to an appraisal, or to be part of a learning programme of some sort) contributes to the participant's view of its significance. Certainly, in the cases studied here, those participants who received 360 degree feedback as part of a career development, appraisal or management development programme felt that the feedback process became an important assessment of their competencies, assuming greater status because the results would be explored further either with a manager or with a coach.

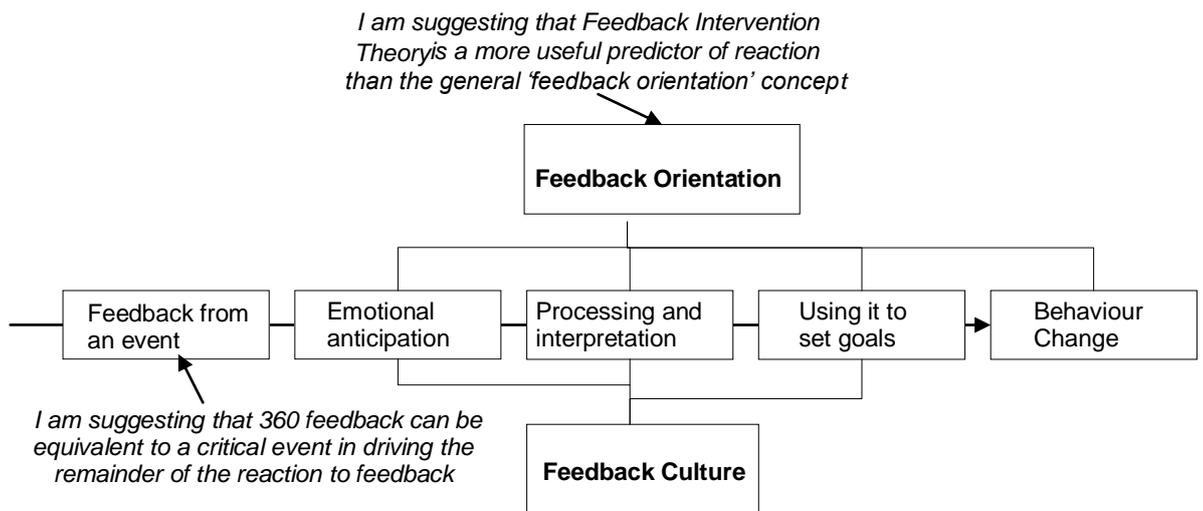
With the assumption that 360 degree feedback comprises the 'significant event' of the first step of the process, the theoretical model of London and Smither can now be tested with 360 degree review as its specific performance feedback focus.

To create a more specific and measurable variable that provides an indicator of the Feedback Orientation term in the schema, I have developed the 'Feedback Intervention Theory' of Kluger and DeNisi (2002) as informed by the comments from my interviews. This theory examines what people actually do with feedback about their performance. As the interviews revealed, some people view their 360 degree feedback positively whether they received positive feedback or negative. Others felt dissatisfied regardless of the 'sign' (positive or negative) of their feedback. According to Feedback Intervention Theory, people tend not to change anything after feedback if they think the goal is not important or relevant, or when the perceived discrepancy between their current performance level and the intended level is only slight, or when they believe they have no control or likelihood of changing their current position or behaviour. Thus, any motivation to change behaviour will come from a perception that there is a significant discrepancy between the required performance level and that of the actual performance level.

The concept of 'feedback orientation' as described by London and Smither emphasises the role of disposition and attitude. These are complicated factors which are dependent not only on the feedback that people receive, but also on personality, experience, and the external conditions at any one time. A simpler measure of individual reaction to feedback can be found in Kluger and DeNisi's Feedback Intervention Theory. This can replace the broader concept of 'feedback orientation'. Feedback Intervention Theory proposes that feedback interventions that direct attention toward task behaviours tend to improve performance. This is a useful addition to the model: a 360 degree questionnaire that contains specific, task-related items makes it more likely that people will move from their interpretation of the results to active goal-setting.

This second stage development of my model is shown in figure 24 below:

/Continued



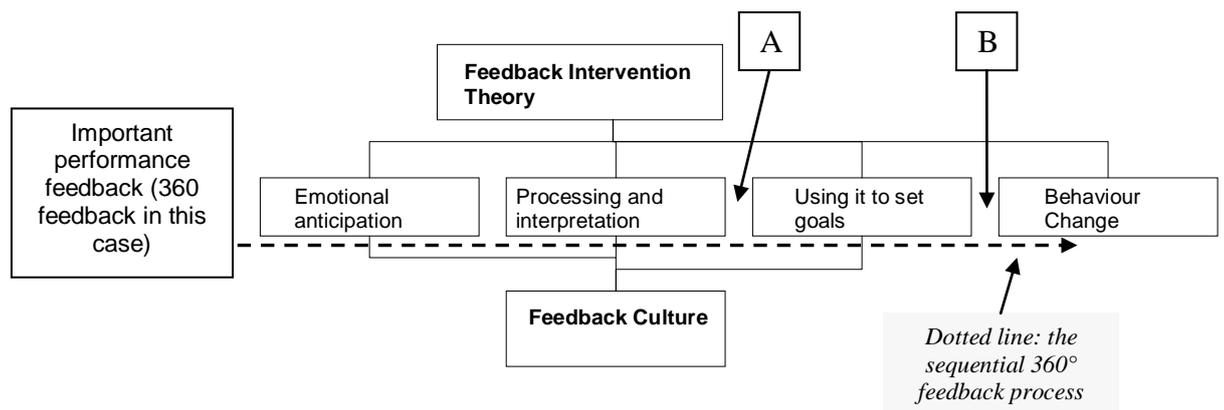
**Figure 24**      **Stage two of the theory building: incorporation of 360 degree feedback as the ‘significant event’ and FIT as a subset of Feedback Orientation**

In figure 24 I add two suggestions for enhancing the model:

- That Feedback Intervention Theory is a more useful predictor of reaction to 360 degree feedback than the more complex concept of ‘Feedback Orientation’, and
- That 360 degree feedback takes the place of the ‘significant event’ that drives the longitudinal process (represented by the horizontal arrow through the five central blocks in figure 24).

**Why don’t some people see it through?**

There are certain points along the central axis (the stages describing what is done with the feedback) at which the risk of participant failure is higher. Two of these are shown as A and B in Figure 25 below.



**Figure 25 Points of failure along the sequence axis**

Across all the case-study organisations involved in my research, whether ‘green, amber or red’, there is some attrition at points A and B in figure 25. The extent of the attrition is the thing which varies between cases.

*Point A*

The reasons for people not making the transition from receiving and understanding their report to setting developmental goals were generally connected with a lack of commitment to, or engagement with, the process rather than for reasons of time, understanding or conflicting priorities. Attitudes towards the nature of 360 degree feedback itself (“What’s the point of it?”) and the kind of feedback received affected some people’s perceptions and if the design of the questionnaire items (the competency questions) meant that people were getting feedback at the inappropriate levels suggested by Feedback Intervention Theory then the likelihood of goal-setting to improve performance was lessened. So, whatever the organisational context, in any of the cases, these basic qualities of 360 degree feedback are important determinants of its success.

These criticisms and dissatisfactions occurred to some extent in all the case organisations. Even if people don’t regard the 360 degree programme as particularly important or useful when they are first introduced to it or given it as part of a development or appraisal programme, they will tend to comply with the process and look at and listen to their feedback. These are the stages that are normally monitored closely by the organisation to ensure value for money in use of the resource and to provide a service to employees. Once

feedback is given, unless the organisation maintains the momentum through encouragement and support of some sort, the risk of people not using their feedback to improve performance is raised.

#### *Point B*

Many things can get in the way of converting personal development plans into observable changes in behaviour. This happens in the general area of learning and development anyway but less so when attached to appraisal objectives (Kettley, 1997). Some sort of re-measure motivates (a feedback culture factor, prevalent in 'Learning Organisations') and personal disposition is another influence. General annual appraisal object-setting can differ from those set as a result of 360 degree feedback because of a tendency to 'play things safer' ; people can plan less ambitious development targets because of the risk of falling short when the result is linked to next year's performance review (and perhaps to pay).

Points A and B do not appear to be independent. Goal-setting can lead to behaviour change and participants in several case organisations mentioned that it enabled them to marshal their thoughts, reflect on their feedback and set a target, the act of doing which is an additional motivator.

Interpretation of the feedback, and then goal-setting, are both more likely to work well if consideration of the impact of feedback is made and incorporated in the design of the 360 programme. In turn, behaviour change is more likely to occur once goals are set. The likelihood of behaviour change can be further increased by considering two more organisational factors: Perceived Organisation Support and Organisational Justice Perception.

#### **Perceived Organisational Support**

The level of an organisation's support may play an important part in determining people's reactions and attitudes to a 360 degree feedback exercise. In 2003 Healey *et al* carried out a survey of 53 companies that used 360 degree feedback and found that the majority did not require any follow up activity (such as a feedback discussion or opportunities to take part in development activities). Only a fifth of these companies required participants in 360 degree feedback to discuss their results with their boss. Many of these companies did provide these opportunities on a voluntary basis but the survey found that these

opportunities were seldom taken up. A study by Atwater *et al* (2007) suggests that follow up activities (actually taking part in them, not just having the opportunity) are critical.

In their study, Atwater *et al* found that feedback recipients who perceived support from colleagues and bosses for development activities were likely to have more positive attitudes toward the feedback system. This fits with Mabey's 2001 study of managers at the Open University, which compared attitudes of participants in the 360 degree feedback programme with non-participants. Participants in 360 degree feedback believed they received more regular feedback on performance, received more recognition for developing skills, and had more opportunities for training than non-participants. This suggests that 360 degree feedback, when run with these support components included, can benefit the feedback culture of an organisation by reinforcing perceptions with solid evidence of good practice.

There is evidence also that if organisational support is perceived to be linked with 360 degree feedback then the benefits of the 360 degree feedback are enhanced. Seifert *et al* (2003) found that development goals were set and achieved when development activity and 360 degree feedback were linked together. Another survey-based study, by Brutus and Derayeh (2002) found that a facilitation session after the feedback seemed to be the key to having a successful 360 degree programme.

If the presence of a facilitation session is important, then improving the quality of that interaction will have a positive influence on people's response to the system and their onward development. The quality of the facilitation session is in part determined by the type of facilitator: if an external coach, then the interaction is likely to be perceived by participants as a positive element of organisational support. But if the facilitator is the participant's boss, then the factor which will most influence affective reaction will be Leader-Member Exchange. If high quality Leader-Member Exchange (described below) is combined with the boss having a set of well developed feedback and facilitation skills then the reaction of the participant is likely to be positive, regardless of the nature of the feedback itself (whether it is positive or negative).

## **A summary of Leader-Member Exchange Theory**

‘Leader-Member Exchange’ literature suggests that managers establish different relationships with their subordinates (Scandura and Graen, 1984). A ‘low quality’ relationship is based primarily on authority and formal supervision. This ‘exchange’ goes little beyond what is stated in a standard employment agreement. A ‘high-quality’ relationship goes beyond what is set out in an employment contract, being described in terms of leadership and dependent on trust, respect and openness. The exchange in this case involves good outcomes for both member and leader – a mutually supportive relationship. The quality of Leader-Member Exchange is a variable. It is governed by attitudes and perceptions of factors such as work and personal relationships, job satisfaction and organisational commitment. If subordinates are satisfied and productive, Leader-Member Exchange is likely to be high.

As suggested above, improving the quality of Leader-Member Exchange is likely to improve people’s satisfaction with 360 degree feedback, especially when combined with high levels of perceived organisational support.

But high quality Leader-Member Exchange relationships may not always work favourably. For example, the relationship between the participant and the people who report to him or her is also affected by Leader-Member Exchange (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). If a participant has high quality Leader-Member Exchange relations with his or her staff (the subordinate raters), they may be more sensitive to any negative feedback they receive through the 360 degree feedback questionnaire. In fact, high quality Leader-Member Exchange relationships normally result in open and informal exchanges in discussions about performance and these are conducted away from formal settings (such as appraisals or specifically arranged feedback meetings). So because 360 degree feedback collects data in some detail from a wide range of raters, those participants with high quality Leader-Member Exchange relationships with their staff may react negatively if low or unexpected ratings are received. But if 360 degree feedback performance assessments are in line with expectations this should not happen.

Another risk lies in the perception of others about particular ‘Leader-Member Exchange’ relationships within teams. If one person is perceived to receive favourable treatment in 360 degree programmes as a result of a clear and obvious high quality ‘Leader-Member

Exchange' between the boss and one individual, then the process may be regarded as unfair by other participants (Scandura, 2000). This can lead to a feeling of dissatisfaction with the process, despite the possibility that perceptions can be affected by the 'Fundamental Attribution Error' (Fundamental Attribution Error occurs when people presume that the actions of others are indicative of the "kind" of person they are, rather than the kind of situations they are in (Hollway *et al*, 2007)).

It is worth noting that high quality Leader-Member Exchange is not necessarily found only between a manager and a high performing subordinate (Brover *et al*, 2000). Because of this, higher performers' observations of high quality Leader-Member Exchange interactions in others can lead to perceptions of lower levels of distributive justice – again, the view will be based on an assumption that rewards will be given on the basis of Leader-Member Exchange rather than good 360 degree feedback ratings.

A model by Wayne *et al* (2002) includes the antecedents and consequences of perceived organisational support and Leader-Member exchange and concluded that organisational justice (particularly procedural and distributive justice) contributed to both Perceived Organisational Support and Leader-Member Exchange. According to this model, an important consequence of this relationship between the factors is the effect on people's commitment to the organisation and attitudes towards its systems and processes.

### **Stage three of the theory building: The incorporation of Perceived Organisational Support and Leader-Member Exchange**

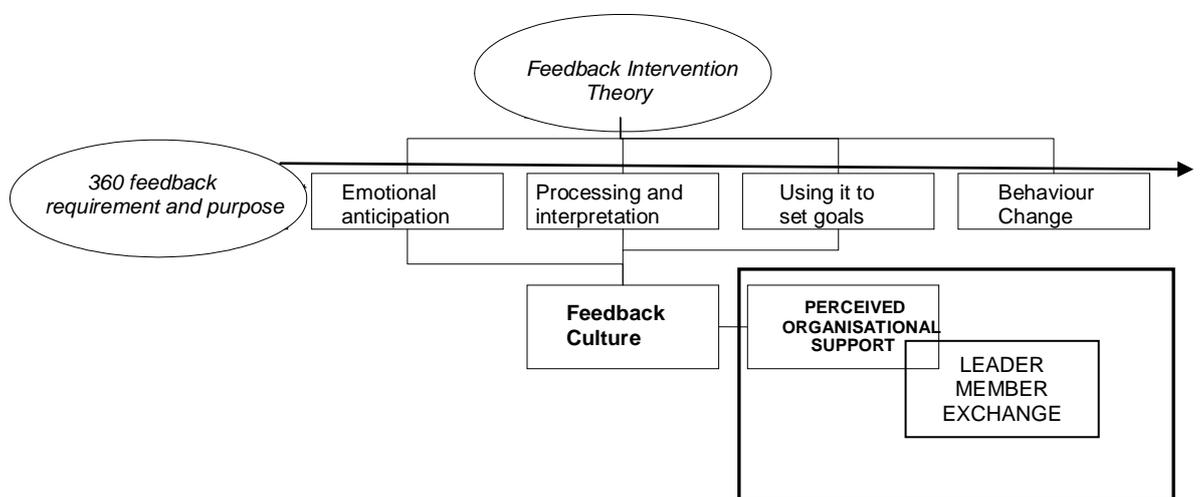
My interviews suggest that the greater emotional attachment inherent in positive Perceived Organisational Support (POS) (compared with the more widely used definition of organisational commitment, which is predicated on exchange of resource) contributes to organisational commitment and therefore to a commitment to changing behaviour if it is perceived to be required to improve performance.

Those interviewees from my case-studies who felt most positive expressed a high regard from the support and further development opportunities that they received from their employer. This was the case with the Security Company and Finance Company 1, where the 360 degree process was embedded in a developmental environment. Where there was a weaker framework of support, as with the Marketing Company and the Service Company,

comments were generally about the need for advice about how best to use the feedback practically.

Having positive Perceptions of Organisational Support generally may make it more likely that an employee will have a positive disposition towards being required to undertake 360 degree feedback.

The schema shown as figure 26 below now includes Perceived Organisational Support and Leader-Member Exchange as factors closely allied to, or contributing to, overall Feedback Culture.



**Figure 26 Perceived Organisational Support and Leader-Member Exchange as components of Feedback Culture (the two components highlighted by the boxed region in the figure)**

An important area of Perceived Organisational Support was indicated by my findings, which was the role of positive dialogue with the participant’s line manager. The effect of productive dialogue, especially at the point of discussing 360 feedback reports and results was seen to be of great importance by participants. Other literature on perceptions of organisational support has shown that those managers who themselves have positive Perceived Organisational Support will encourage the same from subordinates. The practice of involving appropriately skilled line managers in conducting 360 degree feedback reviews certainly seems to support this claim (Morgan *et al*, 2005). When reviews were carried out by external coaches or facilitators this benefit was less strongly felt. This implies that there is another factor moderating the effect of positive Perceived

Organisational Support. This other factor is connected with the way in which people interact with the person facilitating the feedback. Clearly, an external facilitator, or even a regular coach, will have a different relationship from that which line managers would have. The theory of Leader-Member Exchange can explain why an external facilitator will not always prompt a more positive Perceived Organisational Support from a 360 degree participant. Leader-Member Exchange Theory also suggests that people each interact with their boss in different ways (Scandura, 2000) and that these differences can also affect the extent of their Perceived Organisational Support, causing different reactions between people even if their feedback is similar and they have talked to the same line manager.

Leaders (line managers for the purpose of this thesis) develop relationships with each member of the group that they lead, and Leader-Member Exchange Theory indicates how those relationships with various members can develop in different ways. When relationships are positive there is also a positive perception of organisational support. The Leader-Member Exchange relationship thus moderates Perceived Organisational Support. This is the case when the 'Leader' is replaced by a coach or facilitator: a positive social exchange relationship encourages a positive perception of organisational support.

The addition of Perceived Organisational Support to the model suggests an overlap with the prevailing feedback culture but not exclusively - there will be effects of Perceived Organisational Support felt elsewhere in the employee engagement arena, not just areas that are related to performance feedback. The locating of Leader-Member Exchange as a factor affecting Perceived Organisational Support is explored further in the Conclusions chapter. Here I am recognising it as a contributory factor to the overall experience felt by a 360 degree feedback participant.

According to this model, an important consequence of this relationship between the factors is the effect on people's commitment to the organisation and attitudes towards its systems and processes. This commitment and the degree of trust that people have in their employer organisation is described in the literature as Organisational Justice Perception, a discussion of which follows in the next section.

## A summary of Organisational Justice Perception

When examining my earlier interview findings, the notion of organisational justice appears to be intuitively relevant. If people mistrust an organisation's motives for applying an instrument like 360 feedback for some reason then they are not likely to feel positive towards it. The term "organizational justice" was originally coined by Greenberg in the 1980s (Cropanzano and Greenberg, 1997) and is thought to have three different components (e.g. Folger and Cropanzano, 1998; Bowen *et al.*, 1999):

1. *Distributive justice*: this is largely based on equity theory (Adams, 1965) and refers to the perceived fairness of outcomes that an individual receives (e.g. Cropanzano and Folger, 1991).
2. *Procedural justice*: the perceived fairness of procedures which are used to determine outcome decisions (Folger and Konovsky, 1989).
3. *Interactional justice*: the term was conceived by Bies and Moag (1986) and relates to the perceived fairness of the interpersonal communication relating to organizational procedures.

McCarthy and Garavan (2007) found in their study of 360 degree feedback reactions that procedural justice was the most significant component of acceptance. But according to Erdogan (2002), procedural justice itself can be considered as having two parts when concerned with performance appraisals: these are 'system' and 'rater' procedural justice. It may also be the case that this model also applies well to affective reactions to 360 degree feedback

There are therefore four types of justice perception considered here. They are:

System procedural justice	perception that the procedures for carrying out the 360 degree feedback are fair
Rater procedural justice	the perception that what the raters of the subject of 360 degree feedback have done is fair
Interactional justice	the degree to which the communication connected with the process is fair (this includes 'voice' and includes pre and post- feedback activity)
Distributive justice	this is the perceived equity of the ratings allocated

With any form of performance appraisal, if employees mistrust the process it will normally be because of their perceptions about the way that the performance reviews are conducted, not because they doubt their intrinsic value (Brumback, 2005). People want to see their work assessed without bias or prejudice. This means that they will want to believe in, or see evidence of, the four elements of organisational justice above, evidence such as:

- A procedure that is clear and well run, with anonymity of raters and results guaranteed,
- Fair ratings derived from raters who have completed a well designed (in terms of relevant competency indicators) 360 degree questionnaire,
- A belief that respondents have some say in the process, such as at a feedback meeting with boss or coach, and
- A belief that other people doing the 360 degree feedback exercise will receive no more or less favour in the follow up to the feedback

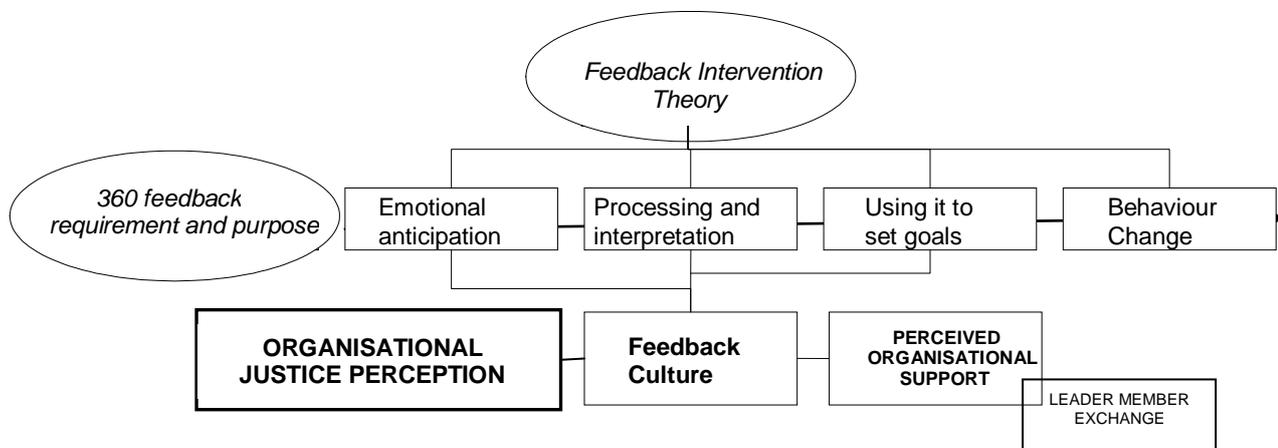
But there is clearly some overlap between Organisational Justice Perception and the two other aspects of culture cited above, that is, with Perceived Organisational Support and Leader-Member Exchange. For example, the views people have of the broadly organisational (cultural) indicators of fairness and justice will be combined with the perception they may have of those people who conduct the feedback meetings. For example, if 360 degree feedback is part of a management development programme, and the feedback is given to a participant by an external coach, then a combination of perceptions (of provision of support and of the work of the coach) may determine the participant's overall reaction to 360 degree . There are several permutations: high Organisational Justice Perception but a poor relationship with the coach, a low Organisational Justice Perception but good relationships with the coach, and so on. Each combination may produce a different level of satisfaction from the subject of the 360 degree feedback. If the feedback discussion that follows a 360 degree assessment is not with an external coach but with the participant's boss, again there is the possibility of different outcomes because of the Leader-Member Exchange effect.

These two factors (Perceived Organisational Support and Leader-Member Exchange) can affect the perception that people will build not only of a 360 degree feedback exercise but also of the organisational culture. Addition of the relevant elements of Organisational Justice Perception to the theory is described below.

## Stage four of the theory building: the effect of Organisational Justice Perception

The final addition suggested by my findings is to include Organisational Justice Perception. The findings from most cases contain comments about trust, fairness, equal treatment (or otherwise), and the need for both openness and confidentiality.

Figure 27 below shows the model which now surrounds the 360 degree feedback process (represented by the middle line) with the main factors of my theory. Organisational Justice is another aspect of Feedback Culture and is positioned with Perceived Organisational Support as an additional variable..



**Figure 27 The overall theoretical framework to describe the main influences on affective reactions to 360 degree feedback (Organisational Justice Perception now included and shown in the highlighted box region)**

Organisational Justice Perception exerts broad-ranging influences on many aspects of organisational behaviour as well as playing a part in affecting responses to performance feedback (Coprano and Greenberg, 1997). Of the categories of Organisational Justice: One such, *Distributive Justice*, affects people's reactions to having to take part in the 360 exercise as part of their job. Another, *Procedural Justice*, affects reactions described by Feedback Intervention Theory because the information received should be at the right level to be actionable and it should also be accepted in a non-threatening environment. Having a voice (an aspect of Procedural Justice) in the design and acceptance of the relevant competencies is also a significant influence in improving attitudes towards 360 degree feedback.

Perceived Organisational support and feedback culture also depend on Organisational Justice Perception factors (for example having ‘voice’ at the time of feedback is of particular significance). So Procedural Justice (especially ‘voice’), Distributive Justice, and a third category of Organisational Justice, *Interactional Justice* (which is related to openness), add to our understanding of the factors that contribute to the success of 360 degree feedback experiences.

### **Combining Organisational Justice Perception with Perceived Organisational Support and Leader-Member Exchange and their effects on 360 degree feedback**

Social exchange theory (Homans, 1958) states that all human relationships are formed by the use of a subjective cost-benefit analysis and the comparison of alternatives. In organisational contexts employees develop exchange relationships both with organizations and with immediate superiors, through Perceived Organisational Support and Leader-Member Exchange, respectively. Leader-Member Exchange focuses on the quality of exchange between the employee and the manager and is based on the degree of emotional support and exchange of ‘valued resources’ (these can be work-related, social, or emotional through the provision of opportunities or support). In contrast, Perceived Organisational Support focuses on the exchange relationship between the employee and the organization. It has been defined as employees' general perception of the degree to which the organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being; in other words, the employer's commitment to the employee (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986).

Both Leader-Member Exchange and Perceived Organisational Support are based on social exchange theory. Despite the similarities between these two constructs, theoretical development and research into them has gone on independently but the question has been raised as to whether or not they are distinct. A study by Wayne, *et al* (1997) indicated that Perceived Organisational Support and Leader-Member Exchange each have unique antecedents, providing support for the importance of both types of exchanges. Maurer *et al* (2002) use social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) to describe how Leader-Member Exchange and Perceived Organisational Support serve as what they call the “backdrops” for employee development activity.

## 5.5 The final theoretical model

My model thus far attempts to describe an integrated set of systems and conditions which, when aligned correctly, can help to create a positive attitude towards 360 degree feedback by affecting people's feedback-giving, feedback-seeking and feedback-receiving behaviour.

The main factors to emerge from the interviews during my case-study research are:

- 360 feedback Instrument Design
- Purpose of the feedback
- Organisational Justice Perception (OJP)
- Perceived Organisational Support : (in general career and personal development) (POS)
- Leader-Member Exchange (through effective dialogue with the line manager) (LMX)
- Perceptions of Feedback Culture of the employer (FC)
- Response to feedback (as described by Feedback Intervention Theory (FIT))

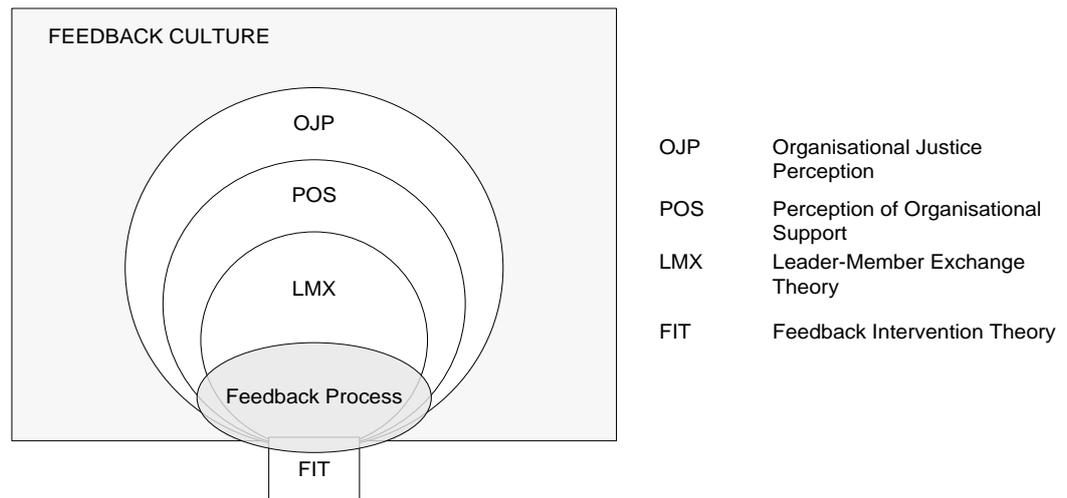
The interactions between these factors give rise to different perceptions of 360 degree feedback by participants in the process. Making the difference to get people to view 360 feedback positively means considering these factors and planning overall programme design accordingly.

There are existing theoretical frameworks which have been incorporated here to describe the cultural and behavioural factors which seem to affect performance feedback. This study has found that the theories of Perceived Organisational Support, Organisational Justice Perception, Feedback Intervention Theory, Feedback Culture and Leader-Member Exchange can be combined to explain the variation in reactions to 360 degree feedback, which is a particular type of performance feedback.

The theory-building process described above takes me to the point of proposing a new model that arranges the factors which affect participant perceptions to 360 degree feedback in 'nested form'. The nested arrangement suggests that some factors are subsets of broader factors. There is one factor which is not fully dependent upon organisational culture. This

is the personal reaction to performance feedback (described by Feedback Intervention Theory). This is the part of the model that is not fully enclosed within the Feedback Culture space, suggesting that additional and distinct factors which are outside the explanatory field of the model, such as personal disposition or the working environment, also affect a participant’s reaction to receiving feedback.

This new model is shown in Figure 28:



**Figure 28** Final theoretical framework : the proposed model of factors affecting reactions to 360 degree feedback, with the factors ‘nested’

A 360 degree feedback programme design which does not take account of the interdependence of these cultural and behavioural factors, in addition to instrument-design and process factors, may result in poor evaluations by participants despite being well designed and presented.

The factors interact with each other. For example poor Leader-Member Exchange relations between manager and employee may be addressed by training in how to manage feedback meetings in order to maximise the Feedback Intervention reaction of employees. This training may result in subsequently improved future Leader-Member Exchange relationships. Another effect of dealing with poor Leader-Member Exchange relations by training staff is that it can, by improving subsequent Leader-Member Exchange relations, increase Perceived Organisational Support.

These interactions suggest that the relationship between the factors may comprise a ‘virtuous circle’: that is, a situation in which improvement in one element of a chain of circumstances leads to improvement in another element, which then leads to further improvement in the original element, and so on.

Conversely, there can be negative impressions and consequent negative effects on perceptions of Organisational Justice and Organisational Support if some of the factors are missing. For example if a well-designed and researched 360 degree instrument is used in an organisational climate of fear and distrust, then the gathering of 360 degree feedback data can be seen as further intrusion and worsen the climate.

If all factors of the proposed model are present and working in combination, the factor which seems to influence overall success the most is the quality and availability of the dialogue between employee and person facilitating the feedback.

If the feedback dialogue is with the employee’s manager, sound Leader-Member Exchange relations maximise the value of, and reaction to, the feedback. If Leader-Member Exchange relationships are poor then other interventions may be required, such as:

- (a) Training of the manager and employee in feedback meetings to improve the quality of the feedback dialogue.
- (b) Use of an external coach as a facilitator with the skills to build a good working relationship to conduct the feedback meeting constructively.

The combination of interactions between these various factors constitutes the overall environment of support perceived by the employee as they experience the 360 degree feedback process. In this way, an overall perception of feedback climate is created.

How much support is provided by different combinations of factors varies from organisation to organisation, but the general consensus amongst researchers and practitioners in the 360 degree feedback field is that 360 degree feedback works best in a ‘supportive environment’. The model developed in this thesis casts light on the parameters of that supportive environment and the relationships between them.

## **5.6 Possible Applications**

I list here some possible practical applications of the model in organisational settings. I explore these in more depth in the next chapter: ‘Conclusions’. Some suggestions are:

- Obstacles to goal-setting, behaviour change, engaging with the system or to using the feedback productively can be removed or avoided by considering the main factors of the model.
- Practitioners may want to run a 360 degree feedback programme in different organisational settings and environments. For example, for remote workers who rarely get an opportunity for constructive feedback. Or in small companies where the availability of training and developmental support may be in short supply. Or perhaps in a large organisation during a period of structural or process transition. All of these environments pose challenges when introducing a performance management activity like 360 degree feedback: it can be seen as getting in the way, or as a threat, or as a low priority. Consideration of the factors comprising my model, their presence, absence or magnitude, can be useful in the preparatory stage of programme design and delivery.
- A wider range of applications of 360 degree feedback can be considered where hitherto they were avoided, such as a part of the data gathering for formal performance appraisal.
- The model can be used as the basis of a checklist for practitioners and can be constructed to help decision-making and planning for implementing 360 degree procedures. The following table (Table 5) poses questions which an organisation or a participant may ask about each factor in advance of 360 programmes:

/Continued over

Questions to ask	Issues addressed	Factor to Consider
Is the 360 degree feedback tool easy and clear?	A 'hygiene factor' question	Instrument Design
How significant is the 360 feedback programme?	A 'So what' question for participants	Purpose
Is it fair? Do I have any say at any point?	Fairness and Voice	OJP
What help do I get?	The connection with organisational or career support	POS
How easy is it to talk with my boss about it?	Dialogue and manager relationships	LMX
Does this kind of thing fit with what I'd expect to be asked for in this job?	Does it comply with perceived norms or is it a surprise?	FC
What does this feedback actually tell me?	Is the feedback actionable?	FIT

KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS IN THE TABLE	
FC	Feedback Culture
FIT	Feedback Intervention Theory
LMX	Leader-Member Exchange
OJP	Organisational Justice Perception
POS	Perceived Organisational Support

**Table 5 Checklist of investigatory questions prior to introducing 360 degree feedback**

## 5.7 Evaluating the theory

In the chapter on methods I described Strauss and Corbin's (1990) recommendations for evaluating this kind of theory (Grounded Theory). These criteria are:

1. The theory is *representative* by being based on a variety of original data sources.
2. It is *comprehensible* to people who are familiar with 360 degree feedback.
3. It provides *generality* in that it is capable of being applied in other contexts.
4. It should also provide a basis for *action*, even if only as a model for further research.

Taking each criterion in turn and applying them to my model:

*Representativeness* has been based on the case-study organisations, each of which used 360 degree feedback in slightly different ways.

Reactions to the 360 degree feedback experiences could be compared and contrasted across the case study organisations. Although the actual procedures of 360 degree feedback were similar for each case, the context was different. Thus the intra-case analyses could generate factors across the data set. By examining similarities and differences in this way it is possible to “*observe extensively the relations between variables*” (Gobo, 2003:253).

*Comprehensibility* is demonstrated through the clear links between the theory and established organisational systems, processes and experiences. This adds support to the reliability of the model

Using surveys such as that of Appendix 2 allowed the sharing of the findings and emerging theory with the contributing organisations. These discussions provided an additional triangulation point for testing the credibility of the factor definitions and of their significance. Discussions were held with each ‘gatekeeper’ about the findings. It is recommended that from the model described in this thesis that a variety of validation studies be carried out. These are described in Chapter 6.

*Generality* will be explored further in the next chapter but it is likely that the conditions for effective application of 360 degree feedback will also apply to performance feedback in general. The grounding of the new theory in theories of perception of different organisational culture factors provides a link between the specific application of them towards 360 degree feedback and the likelihood of their applicability to other systems regarded by employees as representing the organisation.

*Action* can be based on the checklists and recommendations that have been generated by the theory presented here. This contributes to the predictive validity of the model.

By using the model not only in the contributing case studies but also in different organisations and testing its reliability in explaining reaction to 360 degree feedback it has been possible to test its validity. These validity tests and model development activities are ongoing, the purpose of this thesis being to propose the model for subsequent testing in this way.

In addition to using these post hoc criteria, Giles (2002:222) and Wilkinson (1988:495) suggest that it is important for a researcher to exercise reflexive awareness at each stage of

the study. As described in the Methods chapter above, this has been a feature of the present study. This has involved personal reflexivity, which is an awareness of the ‘voice’ of the researcher and the effect this may have on the study. Personal perspective in evaluating the study is important and this perspective has been outlined in the Introduction chapter.

Functional reflexivity is also cited by Giles as important. This refers to the researcher role in shaping the course of the study: the arrangements made with gatekeepers, how access to interviews is agreed, how field relations are maintained, and so on. Again, these points are covered in detail in the Methods chapter.

Disciplinary reflexivity concerns the contribution made by the researcher as an investigator and this includes how and why existing theory is being challenged. The descriptions in the Literature Review and in this chapter demonstrate the approaches taken in establishing the research question and the handling and analysis of the data. The essential principle of the acknowledgment and use of reflexivity is the attempt to be objective.

## **5.8 Summary of Chapter Five**

The purpose of this chapter was to take the model established from my study and to locate it within the current literature on 360 degree feedback. The next chapter will describe the various components of the proposed model and the ways in which these factors can interact. It also complements the literature on performance feedback and considers how the model may be practically employed by practitioners and suggests what further research may be carried out on the basis of this model.

## Chapter Six Summary and Conclusions

*(Social psychology)... can and must include in its theoretical and research preoccupations a direct concern with the relationship between human psychological functioning and the large scale processes and events which shape this functioning and are shaped by it.*

Henri Tajfel, 1981

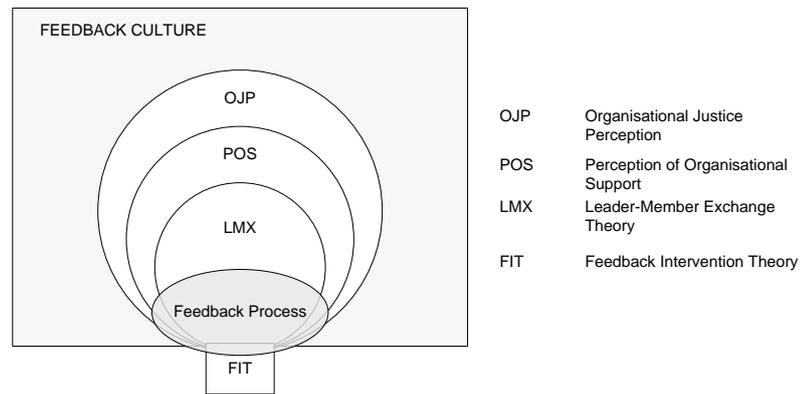
### 6.1 Overview

My conclusions are based on the linkage of my findings with additional theoretical frameworks. I have used the conclusions from this exercise to propose a new theoretical framework for explaining reactions to 360 degree feedback. The suggested hierarchical and nested arrangement of the model attempts to demonstrate reasons why people are likely to react in the way they do to the different circumstances in which they experience 360 degree feedback. By linking my findings with these theories a combined theoretical framework is constructed that extends our understanding of how perceptions of the 360 degree feedback process affect resultant attitudes and behaviour towards not only the process but also towards other aspects of organisational culture.

This new model may extend the applicability of 360 degree feedback to new settings. It may also be that the model generalises to being able to explain reactions to other types of performance feedback.

The main conclusions I have drawn from the study are:

- There are existing theoretical frameworks which each describe certain cultural and behavioural aspects of performance feedback. This study has found that the theories of Perceived Organisational Support (POS), Organisational Justice Perception (OJP), Feedback Intervention Theory (FIT), Feedback Culture (FC) and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) can be combined to explain the variation in reactions to 360 degree feedback.
- My findings suggest a model that arranges these factors in 'nested' form, as in figure 28, reproduced below.



**Figure 28** Nested hierarchy of factors affecting reactions to performance feedback

## 6.2 Recapitulation of the 360 degree feedback field – research and practice

360 degree feedback is described by many practitioners and users as a powerful technique for getting people to improve their performance by changing their behaviour although, as discussed in the literature review of Chapter Two, this assumption is not always supported by empirical studies. It is powerful in the sense that it exposes people to the scrutiny of others and records these impressions in a structured way. Because of this, in a 360 degree feedback intervention of any sort, everybody who is involved is affected. That is, it affects those people doing the rating, who must declare their views and those who are the 360 degree subjects must accept them if it is to be successful. Certainly it is not always good or expected news for those being rated. There may be aspects of their work behaviour that are criticised or rated as low. Also the feedback is not always consistent or uniform: different raters have their different perspectives and may have given different ratings for the same behaviours. In addition, raters may themselves feel awkward or exposed by being party to the feedback. The power of 360 degree feedback lies in its ability to have an impact on people with the idea of making the feedback significant enough to motivate an improvement in performance. This impact can be felt quite deeply by some; this was made clear in some of the interview data of this research. As I have shown, an important moderator of reactions when receiving unexpected or critical feedback seems to be the quality of the supportive environment in which the participant works..

As a method, 360 degree feedback is used mainly for managers who work with a small immediate group of ‘stakeholders’: the subordinates, team mates, customers and boss of

the employee in question. Many managers in many organisations are exposed to it whether they work in small, medium or large enterprises in the public, private or not-for-profit sectors. This study captured views from people in organisations representing several of these types.

My research question asked what made the difference between people's experiences of 360 degree feedback. I asked this question because some 360 degree feedback programmes in organisations seem to work well whereas other, similar, interventions go down badly with people, leaving them dissatisfied and less likely to embark upon personal development as a result.

When 360 degree feedback is perceived negatively, people think that the experience is not beneficial and they are also unlikely to take the feedback and use it to set improvement targets. This was apparent from the interviews in my study; people who expressed dissatisfaction reported that they did not take the feedback seriously, for a variety of reasons, and felt that improvement-goals were not accomplished.

The interviews also revealed that there can be variation of response within the same organisation. The same 360 degree feedback system can be perceived in different ways by different people even though they have gone through the same process. So what it is that makes it a positive experience is clearly not just about the system itself.

In my literature search, no theory could fully explain why a soundly managed 360 degree feedback programme has patchy results within even the same organisational setting. This was the gap explored by the present study. Feedback Intervention Theory can explain why some types of feedback have little effect on goal-setting; people respond better to feedback that addresses development needs at the task level if they see it as important and acknowledge there is a performance gap to address, and also see that the gap is big enough to need addressing (Kluger and DeNisi, 2000). But Feedback Intervention Theory alone does not fully address the differences in perception of the process from the user's point of view – even though notice may be taken of the feedback, or goals set, the subsequent development plans may not be followed or used for improvement.

My work has taken two major feedback models (Feedback Intervention Theory and London and Smither's model of Feedback Culture and Feedback Orientation) and

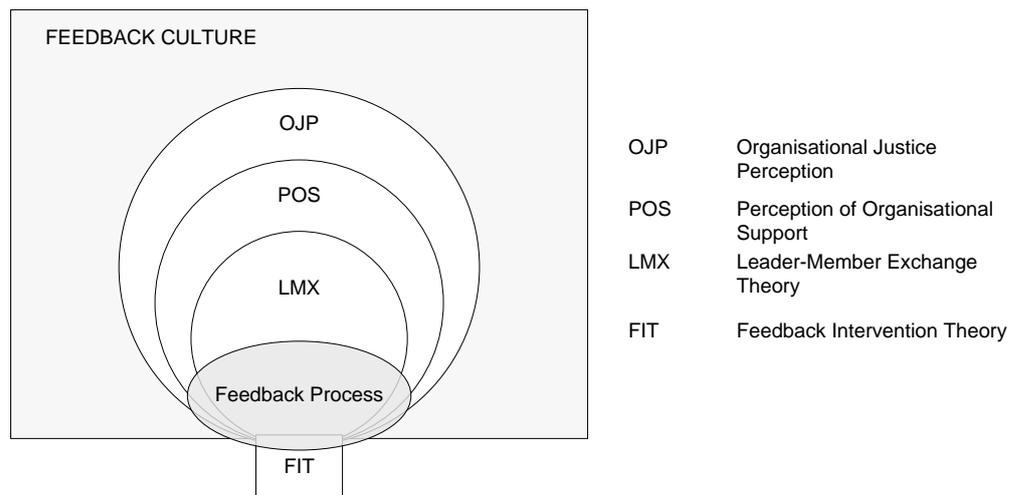
examined the extent to which they can explain my main findings. These theories are, however, based on performance feedback generally. The two models do not fully predict the success of any 360 degree system without being further refined. As basic models they can describe the range of conditions and reactions but are less useful in predicting positive or negative perceptions amongst 360 degree users. Further refinement of the models has been possible through analysis of my findings. The interviews with participants in 360 degree feedback programmes has indicated the importance of certain key factors, such as the quality of dialogue when discussing the feedback, the precise nature of the supporting environment (for development), the levels of trust, and the quality of working relationships that the participant perceives.

### **6.3 The proposed model**

The model proposes that with Feedback Intervention Theory as the foundation, feedback processes are influenced by leader-member exchange processes nested within perceptions of organizational support that is in turn nested within organization justice perceptions nested within the organization's feedback culture. Because it is part of the overall environment with which participants engage when they experience 360 degree feedback, I had initially assumed that the concept of 'Feedback Culture' of London and Smither's original (1996) model would be the area that makes the difference and which would cause the variation in reaction. Feedback Culture is a broad term that encompasses the overall practices that reflect the value placed on performance feedback and the subsequent investment in supporting its use. It is itself made up of different component factors. The importance of these factors, separately and in combination, became apparent when comparing the interview results between different case study organisations. The findings of this project indicate that when cultural factors, such as Organisational Justice Perception and Perceived Organisational Support are manifest, there are more favourable attitudes towards involvement in 360 degree feedback. And when these factors are combined with a high quality of dialogue and relationship between participant and feedback facilitator, then stronger feelings of engagement and commitment (to the process) are apparent.

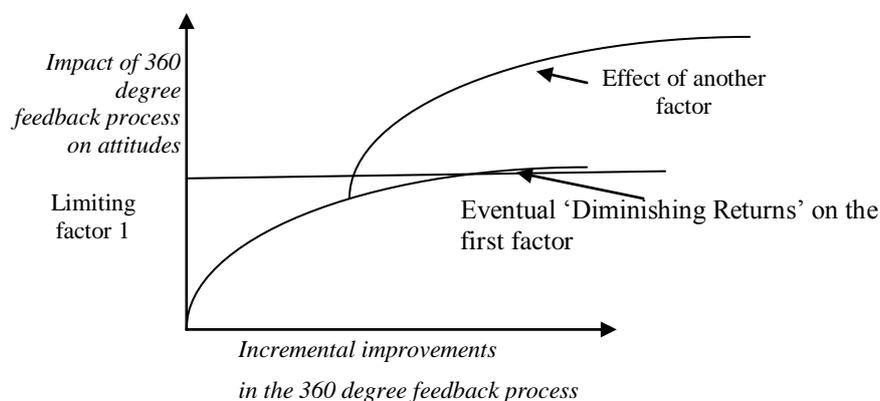
It is helpful to understand these different factors when trying to alter Feedback Culture favourably. Rather than attempt to shift entire cultures, it is better to look at the individual components to find the point of greatest influence. Some of these factors are also in turn components of others, hence the hierarchical relationship mentioned earlier.

Figure 28 illustrates this model.



**Repeat of Figure 28 Composite and hierarchical model of the factors that influence affective reactions towards receiving 360 degree feedback**

For example, if we just use the design of the process itself as the lens through which we examine reactions, it is possible to say that if we improve the design of the 360 degree feedback instrument then more people will feel positive about their experience as a result. But as we have seen through the interviews, further enhancements and improvements of that process do not produce a concomitant increase in positive attitude. The improvement curve ‘flattens out’, as shown in figure 29 below. The presence of another factor starts to make the difference once the first factor passes its own optimum level of effect. The term ‘Diminishing Returns’ describes this.



**Figure 29 Diminishing returns – illustrative curve**

I also found from the interview data that an environment supportive of learning and development will influence attitudes (by fostering positive perceptions of organisational

support) and that this in turn works most effectively when people regard their organisations' practices as being consistently fair (an aspect of Organisational Justice Perception). The influence of Organisational Justice in the workplace is in turn a facet of the Feedback Culture of the organisation. In this sense the model is hierarchical *and* nested. It is this interplay between the factors that can make observable differences in people's reactions to 360 degree feedback. For example, whilst the quality of the feedback and the guidance in goal-setting that people experience as part of the feedback process affects their perceptions of organisational support, it also happens the other way round: the greater the perception of organisational support the more likely an employee will be to use performance feedback to set goals and commit to these performance improvement targets. The Security Company interview data support this notion: even though the goal-setting process after receiving feedback was only loosely structured, and the discussion with the line manager was often broad ranging and not focused on 360 degree feedback results, there was generally a strong commitment to the setting of goals and to the assessment process itself. I return to this point later in this chapter when I discuss why I have avoided a model based purely on antecedents and consequences of particular feedback factors.

I have represented the model in figure 28 mostly as a series of concentric layers, suggesting that each sub-factor is a component of the one above it. For instance, all of the concentrically arranged factors are part of Feedback Culture except for Feedback Intervention Theory, which describes how people deal at a personal level with their feedback and how they make decisions on whether to use the information or not. Reactions described through Feedback Intervention Theory appear to be partly determined by the prevailing Feedback Culture but not entirely. Feedback Intervention Theory reactions are also affected by personal disposition to feedback (a notion allied to the 'Feedback Orientation' of London and Smither's model), which, although affected to some extent by Leader Member Exchange and Organisational Justice Perception, is partly independent of these Feedback Culture components and affected by other factors which influence attitudes, such as personality, beliefs and values. Within the case studies of this project there was a range of natural dispositions towards receiving feedback and towards the intent to learn and develop. The importance of the design of the 360 degree feedback regime is to reduce the influence of this variation so that feedback is received, understood and acted upon. For instance, despite there being different attitudes towards feedback in the Security Company, the Retailer, and Finance Company 1, the overall reaction towards 360 degree

feedback was positive and this was reflected by commitment to goal-setting and development planning.

The proposed model's components and the practical implications of their interactions are discussed in the next section.

#### **6.4 Components of the model**

The outer layer of the model, which is the overarching environment for 360 degree feedback, is the Feedback Culture of the employment setting: the overall support and climate for learning. Feedback Culture (which is perceived as Organisational Climate as described below) is therefore a broadly defined concept comprising general employee engagement criteria (Khan, 1990) and other facets of organisational culture. The stronger the feedback culture, according to London and Smither (2002), the more likely an employee is to have a positive attitude towards feedback. A strong feedback culture, according to London and Smither (2002:84), is one where individuals continuously receive, solicit and use formal and informal feedback. This cultural factor is an important environmental effect but the overall strength of feedback culture alone is not enough to explain variation in people's perception of 360 degree feedback. Some of the cases I studied evidently had 'strong' feedback cultures (such as Finance Company 1) but there were still people in those settings who felt less positive towards their 360 experience than others. It is interesting that many of the case studies reported rather 'weak' Feedback Culture overall (in terms of history of provision of feedback, or respect for feedback activity, for instance, or there typically being few clear guidelines or access to feedback opportunities). Even the Security Company (a 'green' category case) was at the early stages of developing a solid reputation for performance management and feedback (the '*no spoon-feeding*' culture referred to earlier). But despite having a weak overall Feedback Culture in terms of tradition or visible symbols of feedback activity, some individuals in several case-studies (such as the Security Company, the Service Company, and the retailer) still revealed positive attitudes towards 360 degree feedback because of certain specific elements of the existing overall organisational culture (trust, support and relationships).

One of these specific culture components is shown in my model as the next level down from Feedback Culture. The component in question is Perceived Organisational Support, as discussed in the Chapter Five, which, according to Shore & Shore (1995), increases

employees' *'felt obligation to help the organization reach its objectives, their affective commitment to the organization, and their expectation that improved performance would be rewarded'*. This combination of commitment, plus a motivation to improve performance, seems to enhance employees' acceptance and use of development opportunities such as 360 degree feedback and increases the likelihood of them feeling positive towards it. In such an environment there is a greater chance that 360 degree feedback will be favourably received and that the goals which are set as a result of analysing the feedback will improve the employee's contribution. It will also be more likely that people will have greater commitment to the goals they set, resulting in the desired change of behaviour. The case study findings reported in this thesis support this conclusion. Where Perceived Organisational Support was low, such as with the Mapping Agency and the Local Authority, little impact (in terms of change or engagement) was made by the investment in 360 degree feedback. The converse was apparent in the Security Company and with the Retailer, where, even though the Organisational Support was not directly or overtly linked to the results of 360 degree feedback, participants' awareness that support was accessible seemed to create more positive perceptions of the 360 degree element.

## **6.5 Interactions between the factors of the model**

A meta-analysis of research on Perceived Organisation Support, carried out by Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) indicated that three general categories of employees' experiences at work are positively related to Perceived Organisation Support. These were

- fairness of treatment
- support from supervisor/boss, and
- rewards and job conditions.

These three organisational influences can substantially affect people's degree of Perceived Organisation Support. Of these three influences, fairness and support are perceived aspects of organisational culture.

The fairness of treatment that people experience from their employing organisation is a component of Organisational Justice Perception, and the second characteristic identified by the meta analysis, the level of support felt to be given by a person's boss, can be described by Leader-Member Exchange Theory, which I discuss below, after first addressing the way

in which Organisational Justice Perception may affect reactions to 360 degree feedback in my model. We will see that Leader-Member Exchange Theory can also be regarded as a factor affecting Organisational Justice Perception.

Employees develop exchange relationships both with organizations, according to Perceived Organisational Support theory, and with immediate superiors, according to Leader-Member Exchange Theory. They are generally treated as separate factors in the literature but Wayne *et al* (1997) have attempted to integrate the literatures based on Social Exchange Theory. Social Exchange Theory proposes that social behaviour is the result of an exchange process, the purpose of which is to maximize benefits and minimize costs. According to this theory, people weigh the potential benefits and risks of social relationships. When the risks outweigh the rewards, people will terminate or abandon that relationship.

How can this Social Exchange mechanism be applied to reactions to 360 degree feedback? Perhaps as follows: when the risks of involvement in 360 degree feedback events are perceived to outweigh the rewards, it is likely that employees will either look for ways of minimising these risks or for ways of avoiding the risks altogether.

During a 360 degree feedback intervention there are several levels at which risk reduction behaviour is likely to occur. For example, at the Feedback Intervention level, if the size of the reported performance gap is large, some participants will disparage the ratings as spurious or declare that the particular competency or indicator is less relevant or important to their own work (despite in some cases there being an 'importance' reference rating in some 360 degree instrument outputs). These denials are likely to result in no target being set to close the gap in performance through goal-setting and further development, thus avoiding the issue being criticised. There were examples of this kind of reaction particularly in the Mapping Agency and in the Local Authority, where relationships and trust were apparently at lower levels than with the other case studies.

Apart from denial or non-acceptance of the performance rating difference, participants can also reduce the perceived risk of poor assessment through their approach to the 360 degree instrument. For example, people can select their raters with the intention of avoiding those raters they know to be more critical. Some will take a lackadaisical attitude towards the whole process, presumably with the expectation that if they are seen not to take the process

seriously, then the results will also not be taken seriously. This was apparent in several case studies, not just the ones in the 'red' category. Similarly, others will visibly relegate 360 degree feedback exercises as a distraction to their 'real work' and avoid, shorten, or otherwise diminish the importance of feedback meetings with raters. Under these circumstances, the value of an external facilitator or coach would be to provide a more disciplined and consistent framework that creates a more positive environment for the participant to consider and accept their feedback. For example, in the Mapping Agency, participants did feel that this element was missing and in the Local Authority those participants who felt more positive towards the 360 degree feedback also cited the value of the facilitation. With the use of 360 degree feedback as an annual appraisal instrument, as with the Marketing Company, the value of the feedback seemed not to be fully exploited and reactions that may be caused by social exchange were not apparent, perhaps because of the truncation of the 360 degree process: the results were used for assessment and once completed, the results were not taken forward into an environment where the interactions described above could occur.

Social Exchange Theory can also apply to the higher level, cultural, components of the model. Careful preparation of the overall environment for 360 degree feedback can reduce people's fears that they can be harmed in some way. With the Retailer, for example, even though 360 degree feedback was used for succession planning, this was not perceived as threatening by participants. So a positive Organisational Justice culture, positive perceptions of Organisational Support and a sound Leader-Member Exchange relationship with the boss, can all have much more significant contributions towards getting 360 degree feedback welcomed than concentrating purely on efficient management of the 360 degree feedback project or instrument design. The more controlled and 'managed' 360 degree applications from the case studies in this project were at the lower end of the scale of participant satisfaction (see Table 3, page 99 of this thesis).

In the case of Organisational Justice, Cropanzano *et al* (2002) used Social Exchange Theory to distinguish between procedural and interactional justice. Their work suggests that *procedural* justice applies more to the exchange between an individual and the organisation as a whole. This would suggest an effect on Perceived Organisational Support, where attitudes towards policy and management determine overall perception. Smith and Walker (2001) carried out a study into reactions to 360 degree feedback and found that people who had cynical attitudes towards change were less likely to improve

performance as a result of their feedback. This observation can be explained through procedural Organisational Justice Perception. That is, prevailing cynical attitudes indicate a negative Organisational Justice Perception. In the same study, the authors found that those people who more readily accepted feedback were more likely to improve. Again Organisational Justice would play a part but so also would Leader-Member Exchange, mediating the discussion and providing a trusted and secure environment for discussing the feedback. Although not identified as a theme in the initial analysis of the findings of this thesis, levels of cynicism did vary across the case studies and again, the Mapping Agency and the Local Authority would fall into the least positive category. Whether this was confounded by the nature of the overall organisational culture of each institution would require further exploration.

The bi-directional relationship between the hierarchical factors of my model is also supported by Smith and Walker's (2001) study. They found that managers who felt they received positive feedback from their subordinates improved their attitude towards those individuals, thereby affecting the Leader-Member Exchange relationships. This suggests the likelihood of the model acting as a 'Virtuous Circle'.

Cropanzano *et al* (2002) also suggested that *interactional* justice is more a result of the exchange between an individual and his or her superior. This suggests that Leader-Member Exchange would be a factor affecting interactional Organisational Justice. Again, coaching or external facilitation may improve the acceptance of 360 degree feedback. If the Leader-Member Exchange relationship is not positive or if the participant and his/her boss is not comfortable with feedback meetings, then an external facilitator may provide a more positive environment, as with Finance Company 1. Harnessing the interplay between these factors can require a catalytic influence at this pivotal point: the point at which there is dialogue, where the quality of the exchange affects people's acceptance, interpretation and use of the feedback. The Security Company was a good example of this.

## **6.6 The implications of the research**

Using simple processes that bind together all the factors of the model in a way that allows most participants to react optimally to 360 degree feedback seems to offer a way of maximising the value of 360 degree interventions. Tamkin (PhD thesis, 1995) suggested that 'learning-helpers' (other participants on learning programmes) are important in

supporting learners in boosting self-esteem in the face of uncomfortable feedback. I have taken the 'helper' notion and suggest that it is made up not just from individuals (facilitators, managers, coaches) but also from the cultural components of Perceived Organisational Support, Leader-Member Exchange and Organisational Justice Perception. For example, the use by an organisation (such as the Security Company and Finance Company 1 in this study) of a personal development planning (PDP) policy that has a development-contract dimension, can encourage employees to see Organisational Justice, Organisational Support and an overall Feedback Culture at work. The PDP allows a framework for dialogue and discussion which can reduce the more extreme responses, positive or negative, of Leader-Member Exchange differences. The contract should also demonstrate to the employee the organisation's overall commitment to employee development. A well designed PDP contract also allows participants to consider goal-setting using the criteria of Feedback Intervention Theory.

My study suggests that those participants using 360 degree feedback as part of a broader development programme were more likely to feel supported and positive towards a development agreement. In such an environment, either learning contracts would be drawn up or there was a link with a formal career development system, where goal-setting and commitment to improve are guiding principles. The model explains why this is likely to create favourable reactions. The interplay between Perceived Organisation Support and Organisational Justice Perception contributing to the overall Feedback Culture, with the Personal Development Plan acting as the conduit for the contracting, supported by a positive Leader-Member Exchange relationship (or alternatively an external helper or coach). Addressing any issues highlighted by Feedback Intervention Theory can be tackled by the relationship and effective Personal Development Planning. This kind of environment seemed to be felt by those participants in the Security Company who expressed satisfaction with their 360 degree feedback. Those who felt less satisfied cited the dialogue with their manager as a factor, this seeming to mar an otherwise productive and positive experience.

In the case-studies of this project where development planning was not an integral part of the 360 degree process, such as the Marketing Company (which used 360 degree feedback an appraisal application), Finance Company 2 and the Mapping Agency, participants had a less positive attitude towards the feedback process and were also less likely to apply the results to their own learning and development.

It was found by Smith and Walker (2002) that people who over-rated themselves in 360 degree feedback self-ratings tended to improve their performance as a result. Those who under-rated themselves tended not to. Feedback Intervention Theory suggests that a perceived need to reduce the performance gap will be enough motivation for many to set goals and make improvement plans. But there would be others (who perhaps feel they have too large a gap to work on, or who do not feel that the gap was big enough to bother with) who would be less motivated. To increase the proportion of improvers it would be necessary to establish positive Leader-Member Exchange or external support relationships and provide formal contracting through Personal Development Planning to guide less motivated individuals towards performance improvement. The Security Company approach of having discussions with the line manager which are broader ranging than just about the 360 degree results, seemed to work well in this way. Here the 360 degree results would act as a basis for dialogue rather than as a subject for close analysis. With Finance Company 1 there was general approval amongst participants for the coach-facilitated discussion which guided people towards the development-planning process.

In their study Elikier *et al* (2006) suggested that dialogue between participants and their boss should include justification for decisions and the opportunity for the employee's Voice. To the employee this constitutes basic respect, and this has an impact not only on satisfaction with the discussion but also on job satisfaction and on the motivation to improve. Clearly there are additional benefits, apart from improving reaction to the feedback process.

Harnessing the interplay between all of these factors seems to be the way to 'make the difference' in 360 degree feedback interventions, rather than to concentrate on factors singly by looking for ways to improve them independently of other factors. Traditionally, the commonest response to calls for improving 360 degree feedback has been to look at the instrument design.

At the core of this proposed model is the feedback process itself: how it is designed and accessed by users (raters and the 360 'subjects') and how the results are presented as a report and whether this is combined with a discussion with a boss or coach or some other facilitator. A certain amount of design and technical efficiency is required for people to view the process favourably. Things like ease of access, clarity of instructions, speed of report turnaround, clarity of reports and ease of interpretation are important components of

this level of the model. But however good the feedback process is, there is still a variation of response in perception. Further investment in refining the system and adding extra functionality to it do not solve this problem.

Some of the organisations I explored had much more elaborate and efficient feedback systems than others and yet they still showed significant variation in the way 360 degree feedback was perceived. For example, the instrument design used with the Mapping Agency was very similar to that used by the Security Company, yet there are a different set of reactions to the 360 degree feedback experience from each. Within Finance Company 1, there were a range of instruments used, even though they were being used for the same overall programme. There were complaints about the instrument from those using one supplier and none for the others, but the overall response to 360 degree feedback by Finance Company 1 was positive. And with the Retailer, a fairly rudimentary paper and pencil-based instrument was used and yet the 360 degree process was regarded positively. The reasons for this variation are explained by my proposed model. The instrument design and the process by which the survey is conducted seem to be a classic ‘hygiene factor’ – below a certain standard it makes a difference, but once that standard is exceeded further improvement has less additional impact. This was apparent in the case of Finance Company 1, where there were polarised views of the 360 degree experience depending on whether or not the process was easy and ran smoothly. The satisfied group were more concerned with the support and development aspects and did not mention the survey aspects in any depth. Those who were dissatisfied were preoccupied with the instrument and its accessibility. Despite it being a hygiene factor, it is the factor that tends to be most concentrated on by internal administrators of corporate 360 degree feedback programmes.

One area that attracts attention from administrators is the degree of detail contained in subsequent 360 degree reports. Atwater and Brett (2006) suggest that having the right balance of graphic and narrative feedback contained in individuals’ 360 degree feedback reports is important – in their study, numerical ratings plus narrative gets a less negative reaction than just getting narrative comments without the ratings. But once the right balance of both measures is achieved, then other factors are required if the ‘Virtuous Circle’ is to be created so that people have positive experiences of the 360 degree feedback process, in whatever format they get their feedback.

One aspect of design does seem to be of importance, because it breaks into the ‘Virtuous Circle’ by affecting attitudes towards using the instrument and also by affecting people’s reactions as described by Feedback Intervention Theory. The use of reports which compare the individual’s results with ‘norms’ (other managers who have completed the questionnaire) affect Feedback Intervention Theory reactions – the focus of attention switches from the task to the ‘self’, and negative feedback directed towards the ‘self’ generates negative motivational responses (Kluger and DeNisi, 2000, Kanfer and Ackerman, 1989).

For feedback interventions to be directed at the right level the design features must consider Feedback Intervention Theory at the outset. A positive affective reaction is more likely if this is the case. It appears that immediate reactions to 360 degree feedback experiences are important: according to Atwater and Bret (2006) those managers who report negative feelings after experiencing 360 degree feedback tend to have more development needs identified one year afterwards than those who felt more positive towards it. Poorly designed instruments can therefore affect this immediate reaction. One way of attenuating the damage from such reactions is to establish a structured debrief after the 360 degree event, either through effective line manager intervention (affected by Leader-Member Exchange and the level of feedback skill of the manager) or through a competent 360 degree coach. In the case studies, those people reporting greater satisfaction were all working either with trained or competent line managers or with trained coaches. Those with less able or interested facilitators (either line managers or course facilitators) felt less positive towards 360 degree feedback.

## **6.7 Other literature comparisons**

My review of the literature on 360 degree feedback (its design, implementation and the moderating influences of organisational and personal factors) revealed few studies that focused on participant views. Those that do (such as Mabey, 2001) suggest that positive views of 360 degree experience often lead to positive evaluations of the employer. By carrying out the research described here, I have incorporated empirical data representing participant views of the 360 degree process into a theory that also applies theoretical frameworks of Perceived Organisation Support, Organisational Justice, and Leader-Member relationships.

Some of the literature on 360 degree feedback covers individual elements of the model described here (for example London and Smither (2002) on feedback culture, Hooper and Martin (2008) on Leader-Member Exchange Theory, Eisenberger (2003) on Perceived Organisational Support, and Flint (1999) on Organisational Justice Perception). Each can be linked separately to its effect on affective reactions to 360 degree feedback experiences by participants. Combinations of the theories or linkage of the studies with some of the social exchange theories that govern employee attitudes towards the organisation in general is less common. Work by McCarthy and Garavan (2007) looked at feedback reactions in the light of Organisational Justice Perception for example, and studies on Perceived Organisational Support have been linked to feedback in separate papers (for example, Maurer and Mitchell, 2002). London and Smither (1995, 2002) explained success in 360 degree feedback in terms of overall feedback culture and personal reaction to feedback. They created a list of criteria to follow but did not link them to testable explanatory theories. My study has therefore attempted to draw together a number of theoretical frameworks to produce a testable predictive model, placing my own observations and findings within the theoretical framework. I propose that overall Feedback Culture, which can enhance or diminish people's feedback orientation, can be sub-divided into discrete and interrelated components that have theoretical foundations. In any organisation, these components can be assessed and the likelihood of the successful application of 360 degree feedback can therefore be predicted.

Other theoretical frameworks exist which intersect with this study but which have been left as areas recommended for further exploration. Psychological contract studies are one such area. Psychological contract has been defined as "*the psychological contract is an individual's beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange between them and the organization.*" (Rousseau, 1989:123). There are similarities between Psychological Contract Theory and the theories of Organisational Support and Leader Member Exchange described above, which also stress social exchange in establishing and maintaining employee-employer relationships. But the domains focus on different aspects of the relationship. Psychological Contract Theory argues that employees form beliefs about the types of resource they are obligated to provide to the organisation and that the organisation is obligated to provide them in return (Rousseau, 1989; Morrison and Robinson, 1997). The obligations create a psychological contract with the organisation according to Schein (1980), which reflects the expectations of the two parties. Failure of the organisation to keep its promises would therefore be considered a breach of

psychological contract and leads to employee dissatisfaction. A dominant strand of the literature on Psychological Contract Theory considers the effects of perceived violation of the contract (Coyle-Shapiro, 2009).

The alternative social exchange theories of Perceived Organisational Support and Leader Member Exchange differ from this in that an incentive for employees to increase efforts towards organisational goals is created when they perceive favourable treatment. For developing the theory described here, the literature on social exchange theories such as leader member exchange and organisational support provide a theoretical separation of different aspects of relationships between participant and their organisational environment. Perceived Organisational Support and Leader Member Exchange as described here provide two constructs, and Organisational Justice Perception, which is a factor in perceptions of psychological contract breach, provides another. Each of these constructs is represented in the literature concerning performance management. These independent constructs in turn provide a basis for examining the empirical evidence drawn from my research as a series of interactions that are not only additive but also synergistic. The potential for synergistic interactions are an important facet of my theory.

An area of the literature which was not pursued in depth during the present study, but which is a potentially fruitful extension of the research, is that concerning organisational culture. The concept of feedback culture has been defined and used extensively in developing this theory of 360 degree feedback reaction, but because a full exploration of this domain falls outside the scope of building this testable theory, it is positioned as a context factor with which participants are indirectly interacting through its components (Leader-Member relationships, Organisational Justice, and Organisational Support). It is participant reactions to these components that my methods were designed to assess. It is an interesting potential development of the theory to examine the cumulative effect of perceptions of the components on perceptions of feedback culture and by extension, organisational culture.

People's perceptions of culture fall within studies of organisational climate. Culture is widely understood to be made up of a collection of fundamental values and belief systems which give meaning to organisations (Pettigrew, 1979; Schein, 1986; Brown, 1995). In this respect it is argued to be a more implicit concept than organisational climate, which consists of more empirically accessible elements such as behavioural and attitudinal

characteristics (Drexler, 1977; O'Driscoll and Evans, 1988; Moran and Volkwein, 1992). A further distinction between the two lies in the contention that the climate of an organisation consists essentially of shared perceptions, whereas the culture of an organisation is made up of shared assumptions (Ashforth, 1985).

Climate is of interest in examining the findings of the present study. It provides a description of the overall work environment as perceived by employees because of its relationship to individual motivation and behaviour (Wallace *et al*, 1999:552). How the perception of 360 degree feedback can be moderated by overall perceptions of feedback culture through feedback climate is considered in the development of the theory.

Clearly a fuller understanding of organisational climate, and its effects on approaches such as 360 degree feedback perception, merit further research but it is considered to be beyond the scope of the present study.

In the literature, success of 360 degree feedback programmes is often assessed by the amount of transfer of the feedback to improvement in performance. The thrust of my research has been to explore the antecedents of this type of outcome, particularly the attitudes that people take towards their 360 degree experiences. I found that the likely consequences of positive perceptions of the process involved firm intentions to set relevant improvement goals and to work through a Personal Development Plan.

## **6.8 The value of this research and its contribution to knowledge**

### **The contribution to knowledge**

The nine significant factors empirically derived from the present study, and the theoretical foundations for them, suggest an advance in the way in which we explain participant reactions to 360 degree feedback. It is the interactions between these factors, and the potential synergies that arise, that can explain the variety of participant reactions to 360 degree feedback.

This study adds to the current literature by specifying not only the constructs, but also their combined effect, that affect participants' perceptions of 360 degree feedback. The model created here is grounded in empirically derived data that suggests interplay between four main factors, each of which has an extensive research base in the literature but which

hitherto had not been studied where they all intersect with 360 degree feedback reactions. The research interviews also showed that participant perceptions have an effect on subsequent motivation to create and follow a development plan. The model proposes interactions between the constructs and thus proposes a way of explaining what it is that determines whether participants view their 360 degree feedback as successful or not, where success is defined as expressed satisfaction by participants. Where it is perceived as successful there is a concomitant acknowledgement of the significance of the feedback and the use of it to improve performance. Hence the importance of understanding the factors that affect perception.

The model also suggests another important contribution, which is that positive perceptions of 360 degree feedback can positively affect perceptions of the employing organisation. As Atwater *et al* (2007:303) point out: “(360 feedback) *can do more than just develop leaders. It can have a positive ripple effect in the organization.*” The model proposed here suggests a mechanism for this and a way of testing this hypothesis.

London and Smither (2002) have called for a greater understanding of what organisations can do to create an environment and a culture that supports 360 degree feedback. The model proposed here offers a testable framework for this.

Furthermore, Levy and Williams (2004:895) called for more research into “*how feedback is sought, perceived, accepted, used and reacted to*”, and specifically, Atwater *et al* (2007:303) asked: “*how do perceptions of the motivation for the 360 degree process influence acceptance and commitment to the process. How do perceptions of others in the social context influence the process?*” The theory proposes structure and direction for exploring these questions further.

Not only are there interactions between factors, there is also the suggestion that the relationship between the factors may constitute a ‘virtuous circle’. That is, a situation in which improvement in one element of a chain of circumstances leads to improvement in another element, which then leads to further improvement in the original element, and so on.

If all factors of the proposed model are present and working in combination, the factor which, from the empirical data of the present study, seems to exert most influence on

overall success is the quality and availability of the dialogue between employee and person facilitating the feedback.

Because the model is grounded in established theoretical frameworks and empirical research, it is possible that the explanation of reaction to 360 degree feedback specifically may also generalise to apply to other types of performance feedback, such as appraisals, informal workplace feedback and to management coaching models. The model provides a basis for future research which is described below.

### **The particular importance of a nested hierarchical structure**

The factors are depicted in the model as concentric circles to illustrate the likelihood that the smaller circles are more 'local' in their effect. The circles for each factor become larger to suggest the influence of the factor on other aspects of organisational activity not connected with the 360 degree feedback programme.

Deciding that the data supported a nested hierarchical relationship meant examining the possible factor interactions from two perspectives: one being what a participant experiences directly when embarking upon a 360 degree feedback programme or event, and the other being the organisational context that surrounds the programme.

Within any organisational setting, the first influence on a participant's perception of the process is likely to be how they get to learn that they will be involved in a 360 degree feedback programme. The extent of consultation varies. Full and clear involvement in the lead up is the case in some organisations, maybe as part of a management development programme but only a sudden announcement and brief instructions in others. Examples were given in the results chapter of these different methods of communication. There may be overall, and accepted, cultural norms which make whichever practice acceptable and Organisation Justice Perception will play a part in this, along with Perceived Organisational Support. At this early stage of the 360 degree feedback process, these perceptions will be dependent more on previous experience of the culture within the organisation than on the current experience of the early stages of introducing the 360 degree feedback programme. Most attention is likely to be levelled towards the nature of the briefing communication and the perceived purpose of the feedback and then, once seen, on the data collection instrument. Hence, aspects of Organisation Justice Perception and

Perceived Organisational Support will exert some influence at this stage, along with reaction to the basic data collection methods that people experience.

As discussed earlier, the nature of the instrument and the way in which data is collected has in this study been defined as a hygiene factor. Dissatisfaction will affect participant reaction in a conscious way. Satisfaction with design features does not seem to have additional effects on positive feelings towards 360 degree feedback beyond a certain threshold, that is, further enhancements seem to make little additional impression as the locus of attention to the context and implications of the process. Possible negative reactions to the instrument can be reduced by more positive Perceived Organisational Support, which may then encourage a more tolerant response from those affected.

Once a participant has made an appraisal of the properties of the instrument (the questionnaire design and format, the competency items that need to be rated, the rating scales, and so on) the attention is likely to switch to the psycho-social dynamics of the data collection. Existing team relationships may play a part in this, as will the quality of Leader-Member Exchange, and again, elements of trust and justice. At this stage, the various components of the model will overlap, some having less effect on the overall reaction than others. For instance, if Organisational Justice Perception is positive and Perceived Organisational Support is positive, then Leader Member Exchange deficiencies may be attenuated if the existing Leader Member Exchange quality is already poor. There are other ways around poor Leader Member Exchange within the 360 process if Organisational Justice Perception and Perceived Organisational Support are positive, such as the use of a performance or executive-coach. But if Leader Member Exchange is poor and so, for instance, is Organisational Justice Perception, then whatever benefit there may be from the coaching and the use of a well designed instrument, there is likely to be a lack of trust by the participant and a reluctance to demonstrate improvement in any goals set as a result. If however, the effects of Organisational Justice Perception and Perceived Organisational Support can be combined with a good Leader Member Exchange (or an equivalent coaching alternative), then it is possible to see some synergy in the interactions between factors. Whatever the nature of the feedback or reactions to the instrument or purpose, these other factors can encourage participants to look at using their feedback fruitfully.

Once the communication and data collection experiences have been absorbed, participants then have their feedback and make their personal responses to that. Feedback Intervention

Theory has been seen to provide a useful explanation for how people react but, as described in the sections below on limitations and on further research, there are other aspects of the participants' disposition to feedback that are not explained by this theory. Nevertheless the empirical data from the present study support the positioning of Feedback Intervention Theory as a useful foundation for this proposed model.

As the 360 degree feedback programme unfolds, the combination of simultaneous interactions adds their effects together to influence participant reactions. As we saw with some of the case-study organisations, however, sometimes there is a more positive effect than one might expect, given that one or more of the factors is comparatively weak. The Security Company, for example, had a weak overall feedback culture but the 360 degree feedback programme was perceived as being highly useful and satisfactory. This suggests synergies between certain factors under certain conditions.

The proposed nested hierarchy also suggests that interactions between factors can provide synergy as they affect participant perceptions and satisfaction with the 360 process. The synergy description can be described as 'virtuous overlap' synergy (Chadwick, 2010: 90), where, under certain conditions, the factors moderate the interactions between other factors. When the conditions allow, these moderating influences become integrated and work collectively to yield better results than the factors would if their effects were simply additive. The empirical data suggested that certain combinations of factors provide greater motivation to participants. Effective dialogue between boss and participant, for example, combined with mutual trust and a motivational purpose for doing the 360 degree feedback can have a powerful effect. The suggestion that synergies are present is an interesting development and is suggested as an area of further research below.

### **The contribution to practitioner application of 360 degree feedback**

The combination of interactions between these various factors constitutes the overall environment of support perceived by the employee as they experience their 360 degree feedback. A 360 degree feedback programme design which does not take account of the interdependence of these cultural and behavioural factors, *in addition* to instrument-design and process factors, may result in poor participant reactions and experiences, despite the programme being well designed and presented.

When 360 degree feedback is poorly introduced or managed it appears that there is a damaging effect on important employee engagement factors like motivation, organisational commitment and morale and, as a consequence, on performance and retention. The model proposed in this thesis, which suggests an initial diagnostic exercise as part of the planning of 360 degree feedback implementation, can avoid this.

The hierarchical structure suggested here can usefully be considered by practitioners. Attention may not be limited to how coaching and training (and other organisational support factors) facilitate the value of 360 degree feedback, but how the 360 degree feedback process can facilitate training, coaching and other interventions to be more effective in developing and changing behaviour.

Administrators of 360 degree programmes sometimes say '*the culture is not right for 360 degree feedback at the moment*'. The model provides a means of assessing the suitability of organisational culture for the introduction of 360 degree feedback. It also suggests that there are simple and practical actions that can be taken which can improve specific aspects of culture so that 360 degree feedback can be used effectively without having to launch a large-scale culture change programme. The benefit of doing this is that introducing a successful 360 degree feedback scheme can positively influence the organisational culture for subsequent feedback and performance improvement related investments. The proposed model offers the basis of a parsimonious checklist that suggests examining those factors that make most difference to participant reactions and subsequent behaviour.

## **6.9 Limitations of this research**

This study should be considered in light of some limitations. 360 degree feedback can have different effects on people over time. People may develop a positive reaction towards the process but this may be incremental over time (perhaps through repeated exposure to the technique). This study has taken a 'snapshot' of prevailing views. There is scope for longitudinal comparisons. Also, the model attempts, by explaining the conditions required for people to feel positive towards the process, to be useful in maximising the likelihood of a successful 360 degree programme or intervention. Positive reactions to 360 degree feedback are linked to serious attempts by employees to improve in certain competency-related areas. This model does not claim to guarantee successful improvement in every

case. It has been a mapping of the antecedents of people's attitudes to the likelihood of positive perception.

The reactions to 360 degree feedback that I studied were related to experiences of feedback received about discrete competency behavioural indicators. There are occasions when people will get conflicting feedback (perhaps alternative views of the same behaviour from different perspectives) or goals may not be easy to set. Or maybe there is a lot of negative feedback to deal with from the process and this is difficult to either accept or manage. My research does not seek to address these complications except to provide the most stable basis for these issues to be considered and solved. In these cases, it would seem that the dialogue between facilitator/coach or manager would be of greatest value, i.e. the provision of support.

The samples selected were limited. Partly because of issues such as ease of access or the willingness (by interviewees) to discuss their experiences. More segmentation of the sample of individuals would allow for a research design that could examine some of the findings that emerged from this initial study more critically. By including more representation from those who received negative feedback, for example, it would be possible to explore whether negative feedback affected feelings about trust and support and how this may affect subsequent development activity.

The study described here acknowledges the many different avenues of research that emerged as the research progressed. But one of the aims of the study was to build a testable theory based on empirical data collected from those who had experienced 360 degree feedback programmes. Consequently it has been necessary to follow up on only some of the various avenues in order to make sense of the data derived. Although some of the areas have been mentioned above (in the section Other Literature Comparisons), some suggestions for exploring additional domains are made in the section below.

## **6.10 Suggestions for further research**

The personal response to 360 degree feedback, associated in this model with Feedback Intervention Theory, and the subsequent use of organisational support interventions, such as coaching and training, suggests an area of further study. Do the support interventions enhance 360 degree feedback because they shift focus away from self-focus to task-focus?

Studies of self-awareness and identity will supplement the explanations provided by Feedback Intervention Theory. Studies on self awareness (notably those by Fletcher and Baldry (2001) and Atwater *et al* (1998)) have suggested that a focus on aligning ratings from others with the self ratings may not be important in motivating participants to improve performance. These studies have been quantitative, relying on comparisons of ratings from different sources and associations with outcome measures. Feedback Intervention Theory suggests that the focus on the ‘self’ level is counterproductive if 360 degree feedback is intended to improve performance and that instrument design should deploy questions that are set at the ‘task-motivation’ level. Qualitative exploration of how responses to feedback at these different levels manifest themselves and how they affect subsequent behaviour would supplement the model proposed here.

Studies by Johnson and Erin (2009) suggest that those with a collective identity will differ in their responses to feedback from those with an individual identity because of different sensitivities towards group-referenced information, such as procedural justice and organisational support. These factors may therefore have a stronger effect on reactions to 360 degree feedback on those who have collective identities. Thus, sensitivity to the type of feedback (if it is negative relative to norms, for instance) adds to sensitivity to the reactions towards organisational support and justice. Further exploration of these areas would cast light on the part of the model proposed here currently summarised by the Feedback Intervention Theory and instrument-design interactions.

Does eventual behaviour change after 360 degree feedback have a clear dependency on a positive participant reaction? Is it possible for behavioural change to occur eventually even within the context of negative reactions to feedback? The present study suggests positive answers to these questions but the research design was not applied to explore this in detail. Although the theory suggested here provides guidance on creating the right conditions for a positive reaction, longitudinal studies on segmented samples of participants are encouraged in order to examine how differently segmented samples (those receiving different types of feedback, those at different levels of responsibility, or those with different psychometric profiles for example) interact with the nested hierarchy model and how they subsequently apply their feedback. Validation studies that correlate interview data with actual behavioural change or performance improvement would supply valuable data. Useful extension of this work would explore the use of 360 degree feedback in annual

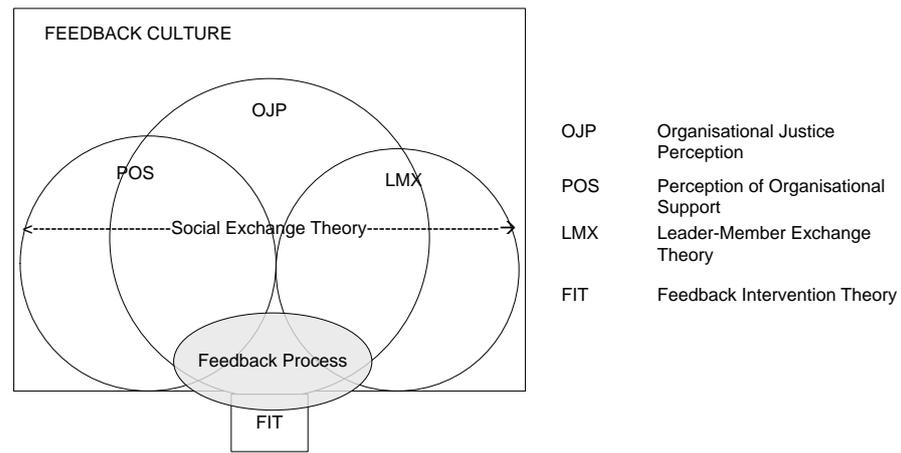
appraisal activity, which was an emerging application at the outset of the research described here.

Longitudinal studies will be useful in testing whether an initial positive reaction to 360 degree feedback is likely to lead to performance improvement or to career advancement or success in some other way.

The question of how the 'ripple effect' on feedback culture referred to above (page 236) may operate merits further study. Perceptions of the culture, operationalised as organisational climate, can be assessed at stages after the introduction of 360 degree feedback to provide indicators for possible improvements in the strength of the Feedback Culture. Survey instruments that measure the perceptions of the model components would identify associations between the factors of the model. Development of a database that allowed development of norms can address the proposition that positive perceptions of 360 degree feedback can create contribute to positive organisational climate. There is also an opportunity for looking at each component and operationalising the factors for quantitative testing of the effects to build and test a regression model. A quantitative model would be a promising basis for exploring the potential synergistic properties of the theory.

Alternative forms of the model can be examined. My main theory was built from the data and then compared with existing theories of feedback and organisational culture. The model I have proposed is the most parsimonious in terms of complexity because, without further research, the data I collected only seems to directly support the main interpretation. However, the data does suggest further lines of enquiry which may enhance this model's explanatory power by supporting derivative models that are dependent on the perspective of the practitioner.

Social Exchange Theory, for example, may position its two facets, Perceived Organisational Support and Leader-Member Exchange, as both being influential on feedback acceptance at the same point. That is, Perceived Organisational Support and Leader-Member Exchange both come into play and need to both be seen by employees as necessary when they develop their attitude towards 360 degree feedback. This is illustrated in figure 30.

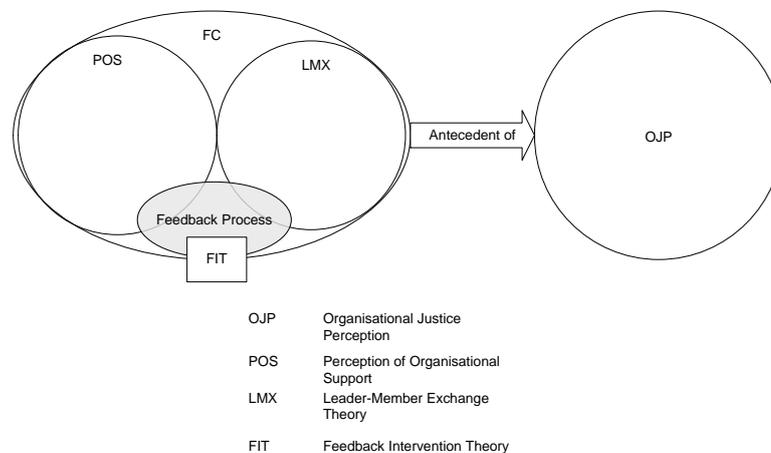


**Figure 30 The model with POS and Leader-Member Exchange, as aspects of Social Exchange, occupying the same level in the nested hierarchy**

How does this differ from my main proposal? The main model is hierarchical in treatment of Leader-Member Exchange, Organisational Justice Perception and Perceived Organisational Support whereas this variant considers Perceived Organisational Support and Leader-Member Exchange as two dimensions of social exchange theory that can be perceived separately when people form their attitudes towards 360 degree feedback.

For instance, an employee may see an exemplary array of organisational support options as part of a career development system which incorporates 360 degree feedback. The variable which is likely to affect positive or negative perception, all other factors being equal, is then likely to be the level of dialogue with the person who facilitates the feedback discussion. Thus, the Leader-Member Exchange relationship may result in a negative or positive perception. This appeared to be the case with the Security Company where some participants were positive about the other factors of the model but felt let down by their managers' feedback. Those who felt generally positive tended to see both Leader-Member Exchange and Perceived Organisational Support positively within their overall positive picture of organisational justice. Those who felt negative towards 360 degree feedback were positive with Organisational Justice Perception and Perceived Organisational Support but negative with their feelings towards Leader-Member Exchange. Faced with this kind of issue, a practitioner might look at the training or improvement of manager relations as a separate exercise, and still feel confident that other aspects of organisational support are perceived positively.

Another derivative of the proposed model is to place Organisational Justice Perception outside the hierarchy of factors entirely and set Perceived Organisational Support, Leader-Member Exchange, Feedback Intervention Theory and Feedback Culture as antecedents of procedural and distributive justice, as depicted in figure 31 below.



**Figure 31 Feedback reactions as antecedents of Interactional Justice**

Indeed, this has been the outcome of research by Erdogan (2002) based on performance appraisals. In this study, Perceived Organisational Support, Leader-Member Exchange and Feedback Culture are described as ‘contextual factors’, and may have pre- and post-appraisal characteristics. Pre-appraisal Leader-Member Exchange may affect levels of Organisational Justice Perception, which will subsequently affect post-appraisal Leader-Member Exchange. This is also incorporated in my own model, which I have described as ‘bi-directional’, and this bi-directionality of interplay means that the ‘antecedent-consequence’ relationship cannot be examined by a single ‘snapshot’ case-study. Whether or not factors such as Leader-Member Exchange have different characteristics before and after the 360 degree feedback experience requires examination of the cases longitudinally.

The hierarchical, synergistic and ‘virtuous circle’ characteristics of the model suggest other areas of exploration. How organisational climate, as an overall perception of the working environment, moderates processes such as 360 degree feedback merits further study. The perceived components of climate are suggested by this model and it suggests that if perceptions can be adjusted by an organisation’s practices, then positive responses to implementation of programmes such as 360 degree feedback are more likely. The value of this is that a change in organisational culture is a slower process. But perceptions are more easily altered through concentrating on the small number of components of this model, making changes in attitudes (towards 360 degree feedback specifically) and behaviour (as outcomes of the process) more achievable in shorter timeframes.

At the 360 degree instrument design level there might be important design elements (in particular as they are linked to the organizational context) that may affect how 360 degree feedback is received. At present, such matters receive rather general treatment in the literature and the present study suggests this area as being a hygiene factor. There is potential value in examining in more detail the design, use, and implementation of 360 and the link to organizational context.

### **6.11 Possible dissemination**

The avenues for publication and dissemination I intend to explore are:

- (1) An article or articles to describe the work; possibly Personnel Review and Journal of Occupational Psychology as a formal research article and HR periodicals. Articles based on this work have been published in the BPS publication 'Assessment and Development Matters' and submitted to 'Human Resource Management'.
- (2) Short practitioner articles and features for journals of training and development to highlight the coaching and facilitation aspects.
- (3) This material can be useful for presentations at CIPD, BPS and Coaching Association seminars.
- (4) A research-based book (or chapter) on 360 degree feedback would also enhance the current literature on the topic. One is in press in conjunction with EDINEB.

### **6.12 Implications for practice**

The following are some suggestions for practical use by practitioners.

#### **Application 1: A practitioner checklist of questions to ask when designing or reviewing a 360 degree programme**

This is a basic checklist of questions about each of the factors. Each factor of the model can be audited as part of the planning and preparation stage of 360 degree implementation. Or the list can be used to review and improve existing procedures.

QUESTIONS TO ASK	POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS
<b>Feedback Culture</b>	
<p>What is the track record on feedback?            Is the introduction of 360 degree feedback a drastic departure from the norm?            Is actual performance rewarded or do other factors, such as visibility, dominate</p>	<p>Carry out a survey of organisational climate            Run focus groups at different levels to gauge views and feelings            Use the introduction of 360 degree feedback to shift culture and climate</p>
<b>Perceived Organisational Support</b>	
<p>Is the feedback part of a broader programme of development or succession?            Are set goals put into a PDP with clear guidance on development opportunities?            Do people show emotional commitment to the organization?            Do people feel that the organization can be counted on for career or developmental help when needed?            Do people believe that the organisation will notice and reward superior performance?            If external or internal coaches are used, is there a strong link between the coaching session and the additional development provided by the organisation?</p>	<p>Ensure there are clear links between 360 feedback and performance management processes and organisational goals.            Build a framework of support by connecting with appraisal, coaching, training or succession planning and then demonstrate follow-through</p>
<b>Organisational Justice Perception</b>	
<p>Is the 360 feedback data used in a development programme for the participant only or for another purpose?            Is the information used by the organisation as a means of assessment?            Is the feedback used in conjunction with discussions with the boss</p>	<p>Review policy and procedures about consultation, communications and the level of employee engagement across the organisation.            Regularly ask for feedback on the 360 system and be seen to listen and act.</p>
<b>Leader-Member Exchange</b>	
<p>Is the feedback facilitated at all?            If the manager facilitates, is the manager trained and skilled?</p>	<p>Make sure the coach (if used) and the line mgr are clear on communications            Ensure managers have feedback skills as part of MD programmes.            Deliver specific 360 training for managers and for participants.</p>
<b>Design of Feedback Criteria</b>	
<p>Are the competency indicators properly designed?            Is there a PDP process to guide goal-setting?</p>	<p>Review and test competency indicators for clarity, behavioural validity and reliability.            Produce a competency development guide.</p>
<b>Data Collection and Processing System</b>	
<p>Does it meet the basic criteria of reliability, confidentiality, ease of access, easy interpretation?            Is there too much functionality?            Are you paying more attention to this aspect than the other levels of the model.            Do you objectively review user reaction and act on complaints?</p>	<p>Scope the spec for the system so that it meets basic requirements well.            Ensure that the outputs of the system link with broader structure of the model (consult before implementing, test for usability, say where the information is stored and where it goes).            Don't concentrate on this at the expense of the overall framework (training in feedback, arranging support etc).</p>

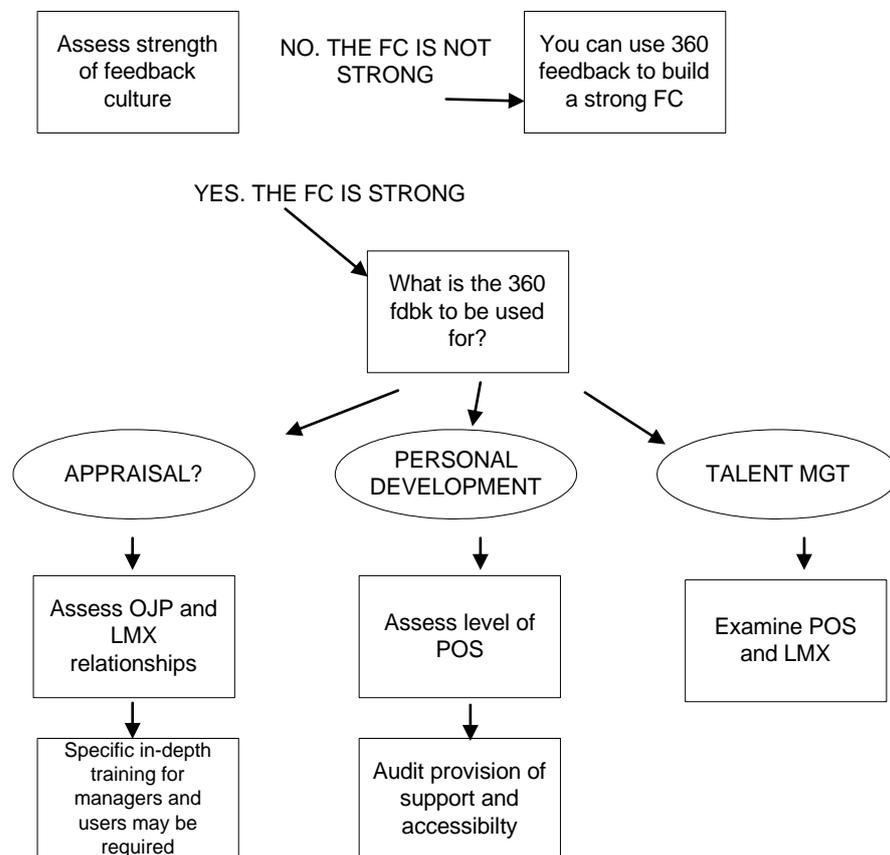
**Table 6 The Practitioner Checklist**

The second possible application is a basic decision guide for looking at different types of 360 degree feedback projects. I suggest two questions for this kind of analysis, shown below as figures 32 and 33

**Application 2: A practitioner algorithm for decision-making when designing a 360 degree programme**

Using the two diagnostic decision tools described below, a practitioner can use some of the questions in table 6 above to identify directions to take through the decision tree. I suggest two questions here:

(i) *Whether or not to use 360 degree feedback at all*

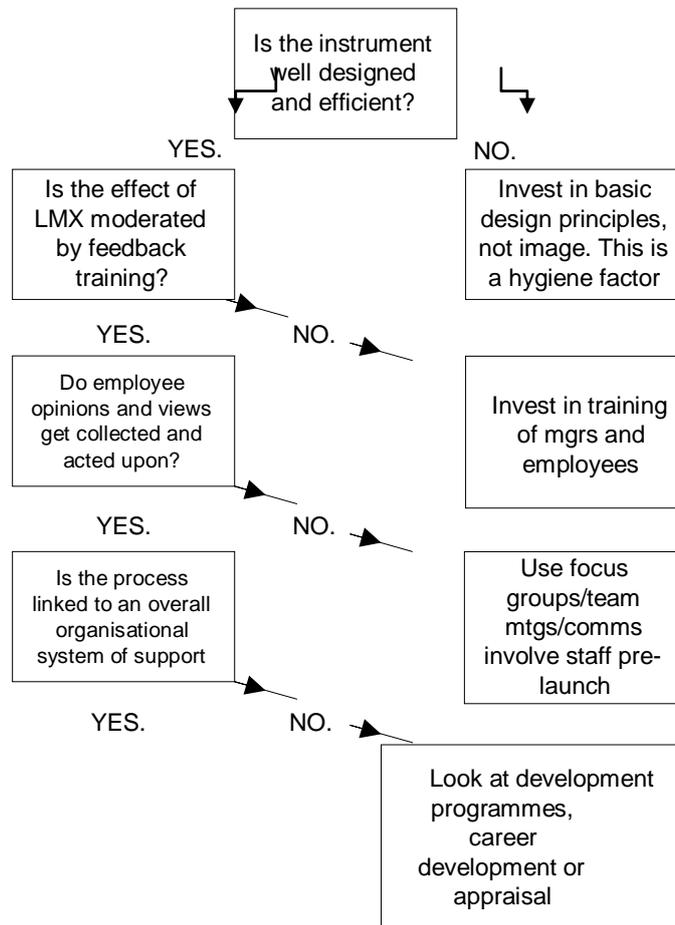


**Figure 32 Algorithm for deciding on 360 degree feedback use**

*OJP – Organisational Justice Perception, POS = Perceived Organisational Support, LMX = leader-Member Exchange FC = Feedback Culture*

This kind of question (a fundamental ‘shall we or shan’t we?’ one, as described by Figure 32 above) means working ‘down the hierarchy’ of my model. Another type of question may mean working ‘up the hierarchy’, such as question (2) below in figure 33:

(ii) *How do we make the most of our 360 degree feedback?*



**Figure 33 A decision-tree for making the most of 360 degree feedback**

These simple decision trees can be further refined and enhanced to become useful diagnostic tools for the 360 degree feedback practitioner.

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## Appendices

### Appendix One

### QSR N6 Qualitative Data Analysis software

- (1) Details of software use at <http://www.uk.sagepub.com/richards/>
- (2) Supplier's information about the product

N6 is a computer package designed to aid users in handling Non-numerical and Unstructured Data, the sort of data that is made by interviews, field notes, collections of documents, focus group transcripts or simply messy notes about an event or problem. The program offers tools to assist interpretation and coding, or Indexing, Searching text or patterns of coding and theorizing about what's seen and understood as the patterns become clearer. You can also use it to automate clerical processes, such as coding questionnaires, and transfer data between N6 and popular statistical packages such as SPSS for quantitative analysis.

#### Use of N6

Qualitative data is usually in the form of written text. It may be transcripts of unstructured interviews, evidence transcripts in legal proceedings, historical or literary documents, field notes, newspaper clippings, etc. However, in much qualitative research it is non-textual. It could, for example, be musical scores, tape recordings or films.

Qualitative research usually requires the processing of such data for analysis.

This typically involves the following processes:

- collecting together all the documents you want to analyse in your project
- indexing (coding) segments of your text into various indexing categories
- searching for actual words, phrases etc in the text of the documents
- using indexing as well as text search as a basis for finding passages of text and the ideas in them
- making notes and memos to yourself about the emerging ideas and theories as your project develops
- re-organising and extending your indexing as your understanding and theorising grows.

## **Appendix Two      Post interview validation report produced for the Security Company**

### **Evaluation document provided to the Security Company after interviews and data analysis 360 degree Feedback Experiences at the Security Company**

#### **Synopsis of Interview Results**

##### **Introduction**

From the large number of ideas and opinions provided by the 9 interviewees, some concepts arose which can be regarded as 'core'. The most significant to arise here was the idea that a benefit of the 360 degree process is in 'personalising' the relationship with the boss. This seems to be independent of how the specific 360 degree information is used.

##### **Summary**

The experiences of the 360 degree feedback process were generally reported to be positive.

The overall impression is that the process provides an effective framework for holding a constructive appraisal-related discussion. This is despite the fact that the outcomes of this meeting varied in the amount of further action agreed or whether the outcomes were actually based on the previous year's performance. The 360 degree data seems to focus people's discussion on future plans.

Not everybody considered development planning or activity to be the important outcome. But some people who did feel that this would be an important outcome were disappointed by the focus on performance objectives.

A question on the purpose arose: if it is used as a career development tool, should a person's boss be the person running the meeting?

Performance goals were, on balance, considered more often than development goals.

Several practical suggestions were made, notably:

- training or guidance for meeting participants,
- linkage between rating scale results and development possibilities, and
- the inclusion of weightings and norms.

Points that met with universal approval were:

- ease of access and use
- the presentation style of questionnaire and reports
- speed of delivery of the final report

##### **Overview of the process**

During the course of the 9 interviews I identified a range of factors that people regarded as important. Some of these factors relate to people's individual and unique preferences and perspectives, whereas others were

shared with others. Initially I have used temporary definitions as labels for these factors; these I will refine as the research continues.

Three broad zones of interest emerged:

- One concerns the career review meeting
- Another zone relates to the data and its context and relevance
- Another is around comparison and definition.

Some factors met with general agreement amongst all interviewees and are, for the moment, regarded as 'threshold' factors: present in all cases and regarded as necessary but not making a difference between the cases. Examples are mainly around administration and presentation and also the advantage of having a range of views that people get from their raters.

### **Further detail on each listed area**

#### **Career Review Meeting**

Under the general subject of the review meeting, a number of issues cropped up for discussion.

1. One was the area of guidance and training in preparing for and running the meeting, for both parties. People found the meetings useful, but there was no consistent approach and some people reported outcomes which focused on development and others (who were still satisfied with their outcome) said that no development objectives were discussed at all. Others expressed disappointment if they had expected development objectives but did not have any agreed.
2. Linked to this, the decision on whether Off-Job or On-Job development activity was to take priority was made mostly through direction by the interviewee's boss with little discussion. The relationship with the boss is likely to be a factor here, with people with new or directive bosses using their review to look at future objectives in their role.
3. In terms of preparation for the review, the time available for data collection varied considerably (between one and several weeks). Some people did not *get all* the ratings they had wanted prior to their review.
4. Having the appropriate environment for a constructive dialogue about progress, and wider discussions beyond the interviewee's job, were considered important. But given the stated importance of this, there is a possible conflict with point number 1 above.
5. Relationships (either with boss or raters) were felt to be improved by the review and by using the 360 degree feedback.
6. But confidence levels varied: some interviewees were more passive than others during their review meetings whilst others reported lack of skill and confidence from their boss.
7. Guidance on development steps was absent and left to the individuals, some of whom were proactive and familiar with resources and getting access to them. Others were less well positioned or motivated.
8. Whether people focused on development or improvement or both was not always clear. Performance goals were clear outcomes for some, and for others the development goals, often very specific and based on

the 360 degree feedback, were important. Those with the emphasis on performance goals did not apparently use the 360 degree data directly but reported that it was useful in opening general discussion, linking with point 4 above.

The data

The context and relevance of the data was cited as a factor by all interviewees and there were several facets to this domain:

Questionnaire items were felt to be representative of managerial roles for the most part but there was much mention of the difficulty with interpreting and using 'customer contact'. People had been given different 'instructions' on whether to include internal customers or not.

Following on from this, there were comments about some items not having complete relevance to particular roles. But it was not only relevance: the weighting of different items (in importance and also in 'difficulty') was also felt to be a missing but potentially very valuable feature.

The context of the feedback data means a lot to people, to bring the questionnaire items to life and to reflect the demands of the role over the months leading up to the review. Whilst this also has links with the review meeting points above, there are aspects of this that are rooted in the properties of the questionnaire, such as the provision for citing examples.

People felt that narrative feedback in addition to ratings is useful but were less satisfied with what they actually got. The general catch-all box for comments was felt to be under-used and uninformative (like a 'headmasters report'). There was a preference for a series of structured questions asking for specific (positive and negative) opinions.

There was some variation in the use of the freedom to choose who people get their feedback from. Some people would have preferred no choice. Others deliberately (they reported) chose people who would be harsh or critical. There was also a second-hand (not from this group of interviewees) example of someone who had reduced numbers considerably and thereby contravened the confidentiality safeguard. No consistent approach was evident from this sample of interviewees.

### **Comparisons**

The last area could be categorized as the 'psychometric properties' of the process, but this is not entirely about the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. It is the way in which people's results can be compared to some kind of expectation, either for their level or for their functional area. These are the main points for this category:

The rating scale met with varying levels of criticism. Some mentioned that the preponderance of relatively positive levels risked skewing the feedback. Some also felt they needed more guidance on 'what a 3 would look like' for their level or for their management specialism.

This raised the questions of behavioural anchors, definitions to go with each number of the rating scale for each competency, describing for example the kind of behaviour a level 3 manager would show in a particular competency area.

Leniency, or otherwise, of raters depended not only on the rating scale but also on people's habitual way of rating others. So again, behavioural anchors of some sort would be seen as a more objective framework.

Some people would like to see more of a link between the rated items with ideas for development.

Some people mentioned that they would like to see where their scores stand with respect to other people at their level. Norm data, perhaps available in the report, would be regarded as useful in giving people some sort of benchmark as a clue to how urgent or necessary their development needs may be.

### **Further questions**

The link between feedback and improving performance is generally assumed but doesn't always follow. Aligning the feedback process with development relies heavily on the nature of the goals which are set, so combining the positive reaction to feedback with ensuring that there is a positive inclination towards development planning should enhance the entire process.

360 degree feedback plays a significant part in improving the quality of the review discussion and this can clearly be further increased by some of the practical suggestions in the report. What has not been established though is whether the same response between participant and boss will be achieved at different authority levels. This sample was limited to a senior management group and the results may not generalise.

End of report

## **Appendix Three      Interview transcript summaries for the Security Company case-study**

Interview 9 The Security Company  
International Development Director 10 years

Originally did the DDA for development reasons. Feels that the system should not change too much? if that happiness with instruments or measures it is hard for people to see progress. Experience with the USA was that they avoid it like the plague and want to know who the information goes to, what is it for.

This may well be a public sector attitude from government workers. She regards the usefulness of 360 as an advocate in open and honest relationships with her co-workers and a basis for effectiveness. If it becomes political (if you are watching your back or you need to cover up) then it is less effective. There is a fear factor so it needs the right environment. She has only just had an interim review with her new Managing Director, but the same principles were applied. It is useful in that a range of views can be seen as well as the average and yet also retaining anonymity. She sent it also to her customers (external), which wasn't recommended particularly. This included the US Federal government. She finds it useful for getting them to understand what The Security Company does etc. She is able to address some personal development as well but found that they were generally very kind with their ratings.

X was hard with her own ratings almost without exception. They were lower than anybody else. Why? Two things one, there is always room for improvement (you know yourself and if you are being honest you can see things others don't).

Two? timing? reflection of the current job activity. It is difficult to be objective about a whole years worth. There was a gap between filling in the forms and the actual review and things have changed since so she would rank herself differently now. She had to keep going back to say a 3 is good (there is an overall point about Xieny on the rating scale).

360 gets you to talk about strengths and weaknesses and other issues. It is also good to have the opportunity to talk about management issues with your Boss with some fairly objective data. It gives you a basis to talk around. For the use of the report, she went through each question in the

meetings (it took three hours). She is well known by her raters so being out of the UK a lot should not be a problem. She chose people to rate her who were newer to the business, trying to get a mix of peer's etc. Selection of respondents gets people who are remote or close. If people give a gut response it is not going to be particularly objective. The way the questionnaire is compiled means it is harder to rate people you don't work with closely. She did phone the sponsor (X) about her report on receiving it. Her questions and thoughts about it, what bits were interesting and what surprised her. On the report she physically marked up areas where she had questions.

She looked at Manager and direct report scores first. Manager because are you living up to their expectations and what they require of you. And direct reports to see if you are managing the effectively. She did not identify any specific development needs but based these needs on experience. (A link with outcomes? outputs). Example of a development need was a deeper understanding of operational delivery.

She felt a bit cheated at the end of the meeting because David said I haven't identified any needs. Experience builds competency to some extent. She made some comments about the balance of competency for each role leading to her point about weighting factors. This is missing in the system right now example was when scoring her Finance Director on the customer question again? what weighting do you give this 20% of the activity.

Change of Boss may be a factor. She felt that somebody new would have a different perspective. The culture in The Security Company is very operationally focused as a business. So the whole competency framework is.

The use of the rating scale ? people new to a business get lower ratings so time and experience is a factor. So it should not be used in isolation. As well as the functional differences. With the comments box yes structuring for qualitative info. She feels that it is important that feedback in 360 should be no different from what has been said before.

Would she recommend it? Yes ? (but with a But) to be really and truly affective and used properly it depends on the environment you use it in. It must be a support mechanism, open and honest feedback and day to day working and not used as the annual tool. So 360 has integrity only if

the organisation has too. Otherwise it is back to the old appraisal type issue where some people get fantastic ratings because their bosses don't want to upset them. 360 is a catalyst rather than the vehicle ? you can't deliver the change using 360. She is consciously decided not to cascade until the appraisal process for the next level of management. She aims to build a constructive environment. But due process is required otherwise it acts as a negative catalyst. Because this is competency based expectation management in a flat structure means it is not all about promotions and some career moves can be developmental.

Guidance need on the optimal number of respondents and on timeliness, frequency of contact in a year. Preparation for a new job.

#### Interview 2 The Security Company Group HR Director

She has worked 25 years at The Security Company within HR. She has worked in business units and corporate roles and Director roles. Now she has a group role.

She remembers the initial introduction and that it was perceived as threatening. Rating scales were a particular sticking point then (what does "average" mean).

So partial implementation to certain layers happened. The biggest change was to reinforce other process changes. Competencies, Reviews, where in their early days. This was followed by more senior work with Directors when they used the SHL instrument.

Looking at personal development plans using generic competencies using DDA.

After this X moved into a divisional role with X. The business focus had shifted too. She worked with HR Directors and needed to make competencies consistent. Standardization helped with succession planning etc.

Two to three years ago a new model was created which is now standard for the group. After that work began with the software on using these for the career and development reviews. So there were two review processes: a career development review (which was an assessment of development and

career moves) and separately a performance review (objectives driven, which were linked to pay and incentives). So the two processes were split.

360 was introduced as a voluntary addition to the career development review. An optional extra. Take up was reasonable with people with previous experience of 360. Totally ignored by others. There was a learning point here about communications. The instructions "you may find it useful" was used. But this year 360 has become compulsory and to be done before the career review. Communication could have been better. People have found that 360 helped in doing the review.

Once they are over the initial hurdle it is ok, some people find it nerve racking or scary. People encouraged by Managers to do the 360 because it helped the process.

What we should have done was more instruction and communication. Also the 360 stands with the CEO so it is now supported at the top. Some people have said they don't want to use the 360 as part of the review and avoid it by not doing it before the deadline. The competency model has been updated this year and now there is integration of competencies values etc reflecting the strategic changes and the new market and customer focus, and also the brand values like innovation and integrity. The view of the 360 review may have shifted away from being an extra burden mainly because of lower administration requirements through the technology. It is on line and is easy to use and so are the other associated forms. By using the 360 system people are prepared for their review meeting which removes the confrontation aspect. You also don't get cold starts - it is difficult without 360 to come to a conclusion with someone about their competency. The range of views from 360 can help you come to your focus in the interviews. It keeps the emotion out of it and lessens confrontation. In the performance review there is a link with objective to development needs which reflect the competencies which are the needs of the business. A common response is "I know why that has been rated this way, It is because this year I did this.....".

It all links up. Communication should have been there for people to handle the situation.

Personal Views

X has done 360 several times so she feels more relaxed about it and picks people who won't be afraid to be critical of her. This is a stage that must be reached. She has been pleased with the outcomes. Normally people select between 6 to 8 people but in the USA people were asking 20 - 30 people. Guidance needed on the number of people.

In terms of relativity I can pick out things which support my own view of things I need to focus on. She has expressed no concern with confidentiality. One of her colleagues and IT Director picked only three others, which meant he could tell who said what. X said that this would not worry her. They know each other well. This is not generally applicable to everybody.

System and ease of use means that the judgments come quick. You need to have at least two of each respondent group. She likes to look at the charts with the individual behaviors. You must also not use too many people in each respondent group. The scatter charts are particularly useful (the scaled one).

She finds the spread of ratings useful to pick out rogue scores (anomalous low ones) and generally you know what it is about. She has had no horrible responses but it does make you think especially the direct report ones - little bits sometimes indicates something in common. She will use some of the information with her team and show that she is only picking up what they are saying and using it.

With her Boss it is not so much about her personal stuff but on how she is going to implement changes.

There is no prescribed method for support. Currently 360 is embedded driving assessment against the competency. Overall it eases the review process for Managers and makes it more systematic.

End of Interview

Interview 3 The Security Company

X has worked at The Security Company for two and half years and six months in Security. She has seen a culture change progressing during that time. She had previous experience at Nat West.

Originally at The Security Company she was asked to do 360 by X and submit the results to the group. That was an e-mail system, and X did the admin along with the Career Development Review.

X sits down with her Boss and looks at the 360 with the annual review including customers separated out as a respondent group. So the 360 one of things that you can look at together with others. So she sees the value of it as being user driven but because she has the HR background she feels comfortable with the tool and makes good use of it, but her Boss originally wasn't particularly clued up and didn't use it as well as he could.

There is a need for positive dialogue between the Boss and the subject for how it is used. Maybe a training issue? It takes skill to make the links and connections.

I said non HR people might not treat it the same but she said that was too sweeping as statement. Although in the later stages there was 100% compliance she felt that there was not a 100% buy in. Just giving people a tool and expecting them to use it properly isn't always the case. The people who are skilled tend to use it best but they are the people who need least. So you get two poles of feedback one: very positive from the skilled and experienced and the other at the other end.

X admires the implantation of the whole thing because it has been without debate. The technology makes it painless, sophisticated, slick, and easy to use, these are important things in The Security Company. One criticism is about the behavioral statements because to assess them sometimes on your own it is difficult. You need the context and the not applicable cannot mean as much. You need prompts from the individual when doing the others. It is all about the perspectives the contacts sitting down with somebody. It is quite a step to get hard-nosed operational people on board. I prefer to sit down with someone and have a two-way conversation with about it. With the ratings there is also the ease of going down the middle. You really need an event to make it situational, otherwise the extremes come out but not the middle, which doesn't tell them anything. Behavioral descriptors: she thinks there is a happy medium in the number of questions but a bit generic - generated - wants to discuss things. Comfort of the Boss improves the discussion. Talked about the differences between his views and the others ratings.

Giving feedback to the raters is also useful and a catalyst for conversation, but no one else has ever asked X even though she has completed a lot of questionnaires. The comment box is there for use but she does not use it extensively, it is a bit like a school report, bland statements.

The process gives you an idea of strengths and development needs, which go into your development plan and allow you to focus. She organises her own personal development, as do other Directors. She only had one development need last time and that was more a requirement, it was about being closer to customers. The grading of strengths allow you to prioritise. This particular example came out as a lesser strength than other strengths.

In the review they used a shorter version of the report at the meeting and just went through the competencies (10 graphs) they did this because there was a close relation between raters scores. X's were all positive rating and there was no need to go into detail because of the small amount of variation. They both did look at the detailed behavioral report separately. They did not want to go into individual behaviors but the conversation also went into the benefits of some of the strengths and instances when it was a benefit. This give added insight.

Not only did the Boss give his view but also why with examples. The way my Boss conducting the meeting was very good. X regards one rating unit as not far away. She says that she told him it was because he did not know her well enough and laughed, but she notes that the trends up and down were similar. She found the process very useful because it was soon after her joiner it gave an opportunity to get a clear understanding of Bosses expectations. It is nice to feel you have clarity. The Boss also looked at future demands on current areas of strength to focus on future applications, projects etc. Using it on her own direct report to get a structured conversation to address some potentially difficult issues, it makes it somehow more objective when it is black and white and consolidated. It desensitizes, but I don't think it lets you solve performance issues. It opens the discussion about the underlying causes. It gives common themes to explore. It gets people to think about their behavioral skills - the impact they are having on their team, as opposed to objectives.

People can equate performance review with hard-nosed objectives. The use of this approach can alter accepted norms and perceptions of management

and what is important. This is a strong message and gets people away from the numbers.

With re- surveys she uses different responded groups and was surprised to be asked if she had people even outside of the company. The range and spread of opinions makes it more powerful, more robust and valid for her. It is difficult to say if the meeting would have been well structured without the 360. They have ideas of using it in future development center processes for promotion succession planning and accelerated development, but she wants to add realistic exercises to the new role. There is also suspicion about using 360 under the circumstances. 360 also does not give concrete examples with exercises. She feels it is important to talk to the people who gave their feedback, the problem is this is time consuming, but something maybe lost by the consolidation process. X expressed the high need for information and would like the added questions three things you need to improve, three things done well, etc, but 360 brings issues on to the table quite legitimately and allows people to think about them.

#### Interview 4 The Security Company

Recently Chief Executive of The Security Company Canada now returned to the UK.

He has experience of 360 as a rater for others (about two years ago). About three months ago in Canada he used the website version on himself and for his Boss. This was part of his performance and career development review.

He found the process straightforward ? the e-mail notification, and familiarity with the instrument as a concept. People have talked about it for quite a while anyway and it was much better than the paper based. A good format. Online makes it more straightforward and easy to use ? format. People don't mind doing it, as it is online. It is quick. Takes less time to do because of the end distribution (having to do something with it). It is much quicker, and also the confidentiality is explicit. Start to finish took only two weeks.

With the report details are fairly good. The speed of turnaround keeps your interest in the results. Whilst giving the overall positive feedback, X was tent on also emphasizing the following: but you get a

range of scores and certain people go to extremes. So all this report is based on their interpretation of the rating scale so you have to read between the lines a bit. It is a learning experience anyway, but since it is linked to a career review it is very important. ?Depends on where the career review information ends up?

It was his own boss's scores, which were the most severe. X knows he is tough on scoring and that he does exactly as the rating definitions say. X feels that this should be embedded somewhere in the criteria ? explaining the scoring system. It needs to be forceful about the marking. The whole thing can founder on this. So the rating scale is as issue and not just with his Boss ? scores could depend on a persons mood etc., peers as well. The range of scores and print outs are a useful thing. X goes onto compare the measurement of ordinary performance objectives (those with measures and profit links) and wonders about the fairness of the scoring which raises the question of ratings and levels.

Now that personal objectives are as important as the profit ones you need to get that right and know what is difficult to achieve and what isn't, and knowing what is important to achieve good scores ? something's aren't going to be prioritized. ? You as a person, you know what is important for you to achieve?. His feelings during the process ? your own personal interests dictate your importance. Some of the questions you need to really pick up on (importance ratings?).

The relevance of some competencies for example ? customer contact ?When I was CEO I was more customer driven?.

Links with HR systems means there is slight suspicion. Here then discussed some aspects of Canadian culture (not versed in such methods), a culture of ?You have done a good job?. They tend to expect a slap on the back.

In the face to face meetings the 360 is the cornerstone of it. For preparation he took the narrative points. During the meeting his Boss tried to concentrate on learning points for the next two years ahead. X took more notice of his narrative from his peers. More structuring of the narrative would be more useful ?that's quite a difficult thing to condense ? the narrative?.

All the process bits worked well plus the rest of the paperwork, plus the time available is ok with good learning experiences everything went

smoothly. If you are able to pick up the good or the bad out of the data then you can always learn and get better. Self-awareness. Not everybody is the same because of different personalities. You have stages of life etc and this is trying to pick up on a point in time in career. So there are different attitudes and approaches.

There was pity of time to prepare and it was a good meeting all went very well. Relationship with Boss is important (you can have problems with new Bosses). Data goes to HR and is pulled out for succession planning.

The system gives a chance for dialogue and talking about things, this is important, X thinks. The Security Company has lost people without knowing what their aspirations were. We should not be concerned only with the top layers. Too often companies are only concerned with these but I don't think that this is too onerous a job to do. No hesitation in recommending this process as a learning method.

#### Interview 5 The Security Company

She mentioned the comparison between this version of the system and one she had done previously. There is little validity in this kind of comparison because of the various differences.

The online system again is easy; progress checking is easy to do. She was particularly keen to get particular people that she had in mind because she wanted them to be part of the feedback process. Having worked with the company for a long time she wanted people new ?other people have know me for a very long time so were judging me on a history?. Even though you can't get individuals views she wanted to get particular peoples as part of the review.

She struggled slightly with the scatter charts. The amount of detail perhaps too much? For example the response range with extreme ratings. Just the range on the bar charts would be ok. I think there is a fundamental flaw with the system ? to get one person's feedback is possible. You can send it to only one direct report even though they would think it is confidential. She divulged that she knows of a person who did this. Also the case when you only have one direct report. She gave me good ratings, but is the lack of confidentiality the reason? It would be helpful if you can justify, and give context clues, and they

need not be threatened. You need to identify and tailor what the solution to the need might be.

With the narrative you identify people through the style of language. She needs this info to get at the reason for important needs. With some I wondered how much their judgment mattered. The difference between not applicable and don't know ? can't judge because you don't know the person well enough. Getting the report with no feedback coming soon can be demoralising if people focus on the negatives. Particularly the further into the system you go. There is a reliance on innate skills. 360 can be a very powerful and negative tool (personally devastating). For example gaps between self and other ratings, if self-ratings are all high and the others are not then there will be a reaction to the feedback. Her own method involves in looking at how many times the self-score was higher and she went straight to the details of these. She then took out the old report for cross comparison. She asks what is it particularly that I think I am good at that everybody else thinks I am not.

The number of people you get feedback from is important. There is influence on relationships which may need exploring further. Some people select feedback from those who they get on with, there needs to be best practice guidelines ? how to get the best from the system.

Think of somebody in a branch environment, if the report was not as they expected would it influence the relationship they have with those people. They may not feel competent to have it out with them. Does it make them feel threatened? Her own method again ? by choosing difficult people your almost sending a message to them saying I value your opinion. You get into human nature? I wonder who said what? Because you want to change their perception.

Limitation of the system is that you can choose who you get feedback from. 360 provides a good structure for the CADR. You need also to interpret the information.

Interview 6 The Security Company  
Head of Strategy and Research.

Again straightforward system. Two weeks from start to finish. He identified the people quickly and checked who had completed. He sent out

reminders and found that he only had one with a problem but had overall coverage.

He had done 360 before at British Oxygen where the system was much more rudimentary. He brought a copy with him.

His own method is to run out a copy and fill it out on paper ? leave it two or three days and then do it online by comparison. The idea is to make sure that his conclusions are consistent. It generally doesn't happen. He looks for differences of more than one unit.

He does not like the choice of respondents. Prefers to be asked for a list of all the people in his group and then to have the system auto select. It is difficult to be balanced. He looked for people who would be critical. Some questions were difficult to interpret because of role and maybe some rewording of the question to make it clear how they apply to customer facing or internal customer jobs.

He had no direct reports therefore picked a project manager who had worked with. He feels more explanation is required about some of the questions. Inclusion of a general The Security Company score would be good. Assessment of averages is difficult. The scatter chart would help if centered on as need for instance. His own use of report involves looking for weaknesses (where his manager or two other have given lower scores) He uses the scatter charts first and understands them well. He needs to nail down what he can do something with and finds that the aggregations are fairly bland in the charts. So the specific is on the behavioral chart, and so he eventually ends up with list of range. The spreads are instructive. The tendency is to take an inter-cortile view and look for multiple groupings and something of significance. He then asks why.

If there is a wide spread he asks where is he really. How can he modify behavior consistently? Self-perception is important. It is too easy to rationalise. The ratings scale does enough. Limitations of the questionnaire include the subjective question.

He needs to understand what a particular level means in terms of a description (Behaviorally anchored). He needs reference to a dictionary or guide of some sort or links on the online version to such a guide. More information informs the rating process.

He tends not to use a narrative himself and would be surprised if any views expressed would be negative. Also amenity vanishes with the narrative bits.

Benefits are more useful than just the performance review on its own because you have a wider selection of views and therefore take it seriously. The Boss will also have a broader perspective. (He has not had his meeting yet).

He feels that people don't like being critical (that was British Oxygen).

He worries about the fading away of initiatives things need embedding and sticking with. Further into the organisation there is more onerous on middle managers who are pressured etc and less enthusiastic in devoting time. This process needs to be a performance objective to get the process working. Re-surveys are of value (he will do his own comparison with British Oxygen). He considers trends being more important than absolute scores. The detail is very important.

There is no guidance in the process about how many respondents to use. Simple guidelines would be useful for example in the e-mail message. There may be workload implications ahead ? spans of control of middle managers.

Interview 7 The Security Company  
Financial Controller

Five years with the company, various roles.

He expressed no concern about getting the feedback from people. The process was quick, he started it three weeks ago and two weeks ago had his career review meeting. Because of the short time scale he did have problems with the feedback ? the date for submission was missed by people outside the UK. He felt he had to close the deadline so that he could print off his report and got six out of eight people to complete.

The first he knew of this was a date for his career review from his Boss plus an e-mail from X. He focused on it and did it in one go. The

difficulty he found was being in a corporate office and things like customer is difficult to define (internal/external). He was told the question referred to external only (that was from Nick and X). There was difficulty in credible assessment and he used the adequate rating for most of his responses. He is also new to the process. Knowing that others would rate him he was playing it safe. He found he had underrated.

His Boss knows his strengths and weaknesses well. He looked for anomalies in the spread of scores. He was pleased with responses from others he used 2's and 3's others were 3 to 5. It seems that he sets high standards for himself anyway. The discussion was fine but defining the next bit was a difficult task. A 360 system makes you think and formulates that. It allows you to assess yourself. He was generally pleased with others ratings.

He will concentrate on his communication skills most of his development needs are technical. His own approach to the report ? he ringed his own extremes and used all parts of the document. It was the first that he had ever seen one of this and suggested that there could be useful preparatory material using sample reports. His other recommendation was about the relevance of the questions and functional specifics. He did mention one other person who had been the subject of an assessment who had used the outstanding score a few times just to see what would happen with his Boss.

Interview 8 The Security Company

Deputy Head of Internal Audit and 10 years with The Security Company. In the current post for about a year.

This was his first time through it, about three weeks ago he was given the pack on the 360, and his review was only last week.

One drawback was that invited his direct reports and indirect all under one category. He also nominated five customers but non-of them responded in time ? he chased with e-mails but got the rest too late so time span is a factor maybe. He thinks that people like that will put it aside as non-essential and then it gets forgotten. Therefore out of his control. It was his decision to include five internal customers.

He is quite a big fan of 360 because compared with traditional appraisal you get a broader perspective and also just using they Boss means they don't actually see you in action a lot. There is a risk factor, which is that the Manager can look at it and can rationalise away the others. Comments like ? they like you too much, they are too kind. So the Boss will say concentrate on what I say. Phil's Boss was new to this too.

In the meeting the 360 was used to support the career review but guidelines are needed. He did not know whether HR gave guidance generally. What he expected to come out came out and he did not disagree with any of it. He had a useful discussion around. Ratings. They focused on development needs and made it a more constructive review, using the time better. They did not waste time on obvious strengths. He feels it softens the confrontational side of the meeting. People are less inclined to argue in the face of evidence.

There are a lot of questions to go through which is difficult. He first did a troll through them then review his own ratings and downgraded some. He found it difficult on applying to internal service providers. He put not applicable for some but found that his raters has actually scored him. He was generally tough on his own ratings. In terms of application question on for example ? market focus were difficult to interpret in terms of internal audit. On the one hand it could not applicable or it could simply be asking how much you know about The Security Company's operations. So guidance is required or at least comments about whether or not a question may be difficult to answer.

He found the rating scale loaded to the positive end and that made it difficult. He used 2's and 3's and had to force himself to use 1's. He needed to know what the ratings mean otherwise he just uses the average. But oddly when asked about linking numbers to context examples he said not really he could not see how. He finds the constant reminder of the scale on the screen useful.

The more people you add the greater the central tendency but the more people the better in a way. Phil was harsh on his own self-rating because he did not want to appear pompous and arrogant. He doesn't think it affected things because he was able or they were able to discount some of it. He mostly used the bar charts in the meeting and ignored the listings and scatter grams. Firstly he looked at his Manager rating and his own rating and looked for gaps.

In the meeting the results and their use became clearer but the Boss tended to guide the development. In the meeting the Boss says here's an area you scored yourself lower why was that let's talk about. He also identified where had scored Phil lower. They then would assess the importance etc.; Real life information and examples are not on the 360. So they talked about when thinking about areas to improve. They also found that if you had not had an opportunity to demonstrate it then your ratings would be low. It could then be fit into the action plan.

Operational priorities affect opportunity, for example, recent work has been on recruiting and building the department etc. so he got good scores in these areas but not in strategic planning which is seasonal.

The 360 guides the conversation. He will use it with his own staff, sitting down at the end of year review and thus avoiding difficulties of traditional methods. He likes the separation of the career review from pay. He has a new department with no set objectives yet.

As for the use of benchmarks, it introduces the fear of scoring below it so self-ratings increase.

Useful for getting feedback from outside ? Phil can use this at a departmental level as a management tool. Even though the feedback is directed towards an individual it also reflects the department. Things like communication and straight dealing etc are particularly relevant. It highlights problems or individuals.

For improving the process he suggests advice on doing it early, the number of people, chasing people. Generally the mechanics of it. He would like to see it run for two to three years to see how it goes. As opposed to drastic changes like introducing job profiles. Advice on how to use it in interview situations would also be useful. Beware of lip service to personal development, which will reduce credibility, despite the quality of the instrument. His comment was you have got to see it through. You have control over how many respondents to actually include therefore you can fine tune. But you need to identify the list first and then stick with. You can see who has responded and also you hasn't.

Interview The Security Company

Interview 1

16 years in The Security Company

Feels always well disposed to feedback of all sorts through exporting experience. Currently moving away from just training and development to organisational development which constitutes a role shift. Worked on the original project with cash division Area Directors.

Timing is an important issue organisational change and resistance etc and to improve performance and with people moving out of the organisation and the same time made for suspicion at the time also there was a lack of awareness of the use of 360 feedback.

At that time X was on the periphery therefore felt able to be detached and analytical. His main learning point was introducing big change project requires you to prepare the ground and think carefully of the contacts. He likes to use the term "catalytic conversations" when talking about appraisals. He doesn't want to focus on just the outcome rather the benefits of the process and of having a conversation about your own work with your boss. This he thinks is more valuable and provides insights. He regards the use of conversations as powerful and that the 360 deg process gives structure to that.

As a subject of 360 deg development, after 1998, he did one to ones with general interviews with Senior Managers (to avoid sheep dip programmes). He also studied for a Masters in Management Development at Roffey Park. X built this process to flush out general development needs. Director development work by SHL when The Security Company was a big user. X went through a 360 deg process himself first. That was a self-scoring instrument, which was his first experience. Attributes his enjoyment of this to his own ego because he found the results reassuring. There was also a link with a key point in his own career path so this plus positive feedback was helpful. X's next experience was with the current software. He is introducing global career development programs with several competency models and there have been several business acquisitions globally. X led a group to produce a single model from these. This unifies the vocabulary for all recruitment, appraisals etc. He tried using the basic e-mail based system (which wasn't easy) and there was no great uptake of that. But this at the time was not central to the appraisal process. He believes that learning builds iteratively and it feels like it fits together. The career and development review benefited from the ease of use of the web based system to provide information into

the process. The career and development review was a formalised procedure but involved a blank form on a table (not pre-done) and includes the competency model etc.

There is a scoring process but a 360 report has already been produced. People are generally doing a good job. The idea is to drill down into meaningful information - for example - where a boss scored lower than as self rating. Also the idea to get into some real examples and looking at the absolute scores as well. The result is a frank discussion, but there is no training for Bosses in the process of running this meeting using the 360 information.

The ethos in The Security Company is not to spoon feed. X is always more interested in his Bosses view than in the others. He is aware that the Boss does not always see the best work, in frequent meetings (two or three conversations per week).

Xs' feedback from clients - he thinks he can tell when they are unhappy and he senses mood through listening. The level of contact is a gauge of how well things are going. Stakeholders go into the system as colleagues. X came out of the career development review feeling a little bit less than positive (even though the 360 report was good). The discussion had gone onto organisation development issues for the department. So the 360 is catalytic i.e. it leads onto a larger picture and confronts some fundamental issues.

X sees these as pieces in a jigsaw (users post it sticker to demonstrate). The appearances of the software are important it tell you what you want to do.

#### Additional Points

Used the phrase eyeball to eyeball meeting with Boss about the reality of your work and that there are rich benefits of this.

Also said that all we have in the organisations are conversations. He was interested in observing the initial introduction of the instrument several years back because there were all sorts of things going on. There was turbuXce and then something like this was introduced which the draws the fire. So the question arose in his mind how do we do something like this without drawing that fire and therefore considered a method around that.

X also mentioned that he was hooked on the conversations, so introducing 360 is a means of forcing people to have conversation, the idea being to flush out development needs. He appreciates the need to use training spend better by targeting.

Reference 1 relates to the questionnaire he did on himself originally.

Another point about ease of use is the time taken to fill in a questionnaire 7-8 mins is what he mentioned. Also the time it takes to get your report. The fact that you are presented with 26 or so pages of data, which is all the stuff, you are going to talk to your Boss about.

He likes the step by step structure conversation along with the 360 deg data. He expressed some organisational pride in the fact that people generally do a good job. (The question arises on whether duplication of information occurs in the career development review).

The way X uses data is to choose the points to highlight about his gaps and he then goes onto "have a conversation" about them and get into some examples. He used the term "you can't be brilliant at everything".

His point about Bosses and training - the words he used were "they should be able to work it out for themselves".

The words "ethos" and "spoon feed" were mine in the transcript.

X felt that one of his direct reports was undeveloped in critical judgement and that this effected their completion of the questionnaire. His own interaction with his Boss is on a daily basis just keeping up to date. On being asked who would see his best work - X said this flushes out all kinds of questions.

The conversation in his own review had moved on to a broader strategic field and he expressed his concern that his own job is changing because he is now encouraging a climate where people do things themselves so taking away from him what he is actually best at. X has seen other products and sees this one as superior. He doesn't want to see how things actually work (the nuts and bolts).

A common term used "flush out development needs".

End of Interview.



++ Text units 30-30:  
The idea is to drill down into meaningful information - for example -  
where a boss scored lower than as self rating. 30

++ Text units 59-60:  
The way Mike uses data is to choose the points to highlight about his  
gaps and he then goes onto "have a conversation" about them and get into  
some examples. 59

He used the term "you can't be brilliant at everything". 60

+++++

+++ ON-LINE DOCUMENT: The Security Company 2

+++ Retrieval for this document: 4 units out of 67, = 6.0%

++ Text units 27-27:  
People have found that 360 helped in doing the review. 27

++ Text units 49-49:  
In terms of relativity I can pick out things which support my own view of  
things I need to focus on. 49

++ Text units 57-57:  
She likes to look at the charts with the individual behaviors. 57

++ Text units 61-61:  
She has had no horrible responses but it does make you think especially  
the direct report ones - little bits sometimes indicates something in  
common. 61

+++++

+++ ON-LINE DOCUMENT: The Security Company 3

+++ Retrieval for this document: 8 units out of 65, = 12%

++ Text units 11-11:  
It takes skill to make the links and connections. 11

++ Text units 34-35:  
She only had one development need last time and that was more a  
requirement, it was about being closer to customers. 34

The grading of strengths allow you to prioritise. 35

++ Text units 37-37:  
In the review they used a shorter version of the report at the meeting  
and just went through the competencies (10 graphs) they did this because  
there was a close relation between raters scores. 37

++ Text units 39-41:  
They both did look at the detailed behavioral report separately. 39

They did not want to go into individual behaviors but the conversation  
also went into the benefits of some of the strengths and instances when  
it was a benefit. 40

This give added insight. 41

++ Text units 53-53:  
It gets people to think about their behavioral skills - the impact they  
are having on their team, as opposed to objectives. 53

+++++

+++ ON-LINE DOCUMENT: The Security Company 4

+++ Retrieval for this document: 2 units out of 65, = 3.1%

++ Text units 35-35:	
You as a person, you know what is important for you to achieve?.	35
++ Text units 53-53:	
Self-awareness.	53
+++++	
+++ ON-LINE DOCUMENT: The Security Company 5	
+++ Retrieval for this document: 3 units out of 47, = 6.4%	
++ Text units 27-27:	
360 can be a very powerful and negative tool (personally devastating).	27
++ Text units 29-29:	
Her own method involves in looking at how many times the self-score was higher and she went straight to the details of these.	29
++ Text units 31-31:	
She asks what is it particularly that I think I am good at that everybody else thinks I am not.	31
+++++	
+++ ON-LINE DOCUMENT: The Security Company 6	
+++ Retrieval for this document: 10 units out of 55, = 18%	
++ Text units 23-31:	
His own use of report involves looking for weaknesses (where his manager or two other have given lower scores) He uses the scatter charts first and understands them well.	23
He needs to nail down what he can do something with and finds that the aggregations are fairly bland in the charts.	24
So the specific is on the behavioral chart, and so he eventually ends up with list of range.	25
The spreads are instructive.	26
The tendency is to take an inter-cortile view and look for multiple groupings and something of significance.	27
He then asks why.	28
If there is a wide spread he asks where is he really.	29
How can he modify behavior consistently?	30
Self-perception is important.	31
++ Text units 49-49:	
The detail is very important.	49
+++++	
+++ ON-LINE DOCUMENT: The Security Company 7	
+++ Retrieval for this document: 5 units out of 30, = 17%	
++ Text units 14-14:	
Knowing that others would rate him he was playing it safe.	14
++ Text units 17-17:	
He looked for anomalies in the spread of scores.	17
++ Text units 22-22:	
It allows you to assess yourself.	22
++ Text units 24-24:	
He will concentrate on his communication skills most of his development needs are technical.	24

++ Text units 26-26:  
he ringed his own extremes and used all parts of the document. 26  
+++++

+++ ON-LINE DOCUMENT: The Security Company 8  
+++ Retrieval for this document: 4 units out of 74, = 5.4%

++ Text units 27-27:  
He first did a troll through them then review his own ratings and down  
graded some. 27

++ Text units 30-30:  
He was generally tough on his own ratings. 30

++ Text units 41-41:  
Phil was harsh on his own self-rating because he did not want to appear  
pompous and arrogant. 41

++ Text units 48-48:  
They then would assess the importance etc.; Real life information and  
examples are not on the 360. 48  
+++++

+++ ON-LINE DOCUMENT: The Security Company 9  
+++ Retrieval for this document: 5 units out of 74, = 6.8%

++ Text units 11-11:  
It is useful in that a range of views can be seen as well as the average  
and yet *also* retaining anonymity. 11

++ Text units 16-16:  
Fiona was hard with her own ratings almost without exception. 16

++ Text units 19-19:  
Two things one, there is always room for improvement (you know yourself  
and if you are being honest you can see things others don't). 19

++ Text units 23-23:  
It is difficult to be objective about a whole years worth. 23

++ Text units 29-29:  
For the use of the report, she went through each question in the meetings  
(it took three hours). 29  
+++++

+++ Total number of text units retrieved = 54  
+++ Retrievals in 10 out of 12 documents, = 83%.  
+++ The documents with retrievals have a total of 605 text units,  
so text units retrieved in these documents = 8.9%.  
+++ All documents have a total of 755 text units,  
so text units found in these documents = 7.2%.  
+++++

## Appendix Five

## Example of N6 memo recorded as text during my active research stage

8:24 am, Nov 26,

3:33 pm, Nov 26,

Method for getting the data into this software:

(1) The Security Company - Interview at client location(s) Record interview and make notes

At home listen to the recording and append the raw notes

Read the raw notes plus appended notes direct into dictaphone and get transcriptions Import the transcription documents

0:33 am, Nov 27,

At this stage I'm taking the 'ethnographic' approach to research design described in Hammersley and Atkinson (1995): the development of research problems is rarely completed before fieldwork begins indeed the collection of primary data often plays a key role in that process of development

5:52 am, Nov 27,

Maurer, T *et al*, ( in Predictors of attitudes toward a 360 degree feedback system, J of Occ Psych ( ) 75, 87 -107) suggest that characteristics of subjects and the context in which feedback is given are as important (or more) than differences in feedback level in getting people to develop A belief in the ability to improve ( And from me: maybe overall culture plays a role here? See the Local Authority subset)

1:46 pm, Nov 28,

There is a power/authority aspect at work too, relating to level of management seniority But note it does not always mean a +ve correlation Get more detail on Finance Company 2 for the -ve correlation with the preparatory stage prior to 360 implementation

9:18 pm, Nov 30,

Hammersley & Atkinson 1995 p 42

One of the limitations often raised in connection with ethnographic work is that because only a single ( ) case is studied, the representativeness of the findings is always in doubt

Goes on to point out not always so:  
cases sometimes have intrinsic interest, esp in action research and in  
evaluation studies

10:31 am, Dec 1,

Don't forget to mention the mis-use of Heisenberg's uncertainty  
principle by social scientists

6:01 pm, Dec 2,

Keep in mind - there are 2 stages to a 'useful application of 360'

(1) favourable attitude to the process &

(2) response by constructive PDP

according to Maurer, T *et al* Predictors of attitudes towards a 360  
feedback system *J of Occ and Org Psych*, 87-107,

10:18 PM, DEC 2, BUT WHAT ABOUT STRIVING TO COMBINE SO THAT  
WHETHER NEGATIVE OR POSITIVE FOR EITHER VARIABLE, YOU GET POSITIVE  
PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT?

6:39 pm, Dec 2,

Seems with the Security Company that the 360 feedback is not itself directly used  
but supports generally held views

9:59 am, Dec 3,

HR people seem generally more positive about the 360 process Corollary?

If people have HR responsibility they will become positive about the  
process - which may not be too daft - a KRI on use of HR systems could  
make people take it seriously

9:45 pm, Dec 3,

Wait a minute on the above - on re-reading Michelle Clark's transcript I  
see a lot of critical undercurrent - more than anyone else's in fact!

3:37 pm, Dec 6,

FINANCE COMPANY 1 have asked me to hold on the interviews They have just finished a  
big round of interviews for the Jack Phillips ROI exercise Will try to  
get some sort of access

12:14 pm, Dec 7,

Idea after reading the D844 block 3 notes Triangulation - use the

evaluation report to The Security Company and also a quick online survey check with Mike

5:31 pm, Dec 11,

2 phases to the project? Theory building then theory testing?

Note - For the lit review: sections like

What is 360 (content & method)

What it looks like to participants

What it looks like to the organisation - what's it for?

4:46 pm, Dec 16,

I have created PhD2 file, which has the first attempt at condensing the original codes To do this I have looked at tables of the numbers of times a code has appeared in different documents (combining this with a first stab at creating the Security Company evaluation document) With the first open coding results I copied the table into Excel and ranked them by frequency first for the 'Personal Disposition' codes and then for the 'external factors' Several items stood out as more prominent (note this is only a cursory attempt at quantification, to look at patterns) For the data I found these the most common:

Personal Disposition for the Security Company 1y data only

Personal self analysis

Drill down into detail

and External Factors

Ease of use

A dialogue/ catalyst discussion

I believe Ease of Use to be a 'threshold' factor Once a certain degree of facility of access/use is achieved, other factors determine success the ease of use factors will not be explored further - they can be listed now (online, simple, nice looking, getting reports by email etc)

The large number of open codes are now reduced in PhD2 to fewer, and the results are

Personal Disposition

Self-learning 44

relationships with coworkers 18

Trust 16

Disposition to feedback 14

External Factors

Data collection 88

Data application 56

Rater factors 45

Organisation devpt 38

Support 37

Organisational culture factors 8

## **Appendix Six            The 360 degree feedback process**

What does a 360 degree programme entail? McCarthy and Garavan (2001) synthesised the models identified in the literature at the time to compile a list of the stages of a typical 360 degree feedback process. In 2008, the UK professional body for personnel management, the CIPD, published its guidelines and advice for organisations wanting to implement 360 degree feedback (CIPD, 2008). The steps that are consistently recommended in such guides for good practice are as follows:

### **(1)        Deciding on the purpose of 360 degree feedback**

This is an important decision because the purpose must be communicated to the various stakeholders and the reason for doing the 360 degree feedback will affect their reaction to it. If for personal development it will be considered as being less of a threat than being used for performance appraisal.

### **(2)        Choosing the instrument for collecting the data**

This is generally a questionnaire, circulated to all raters, containing lists of competency indicators each of which has an associated rating scale to record views about performance levels. Often there is an opportunity for raters to add narrative comments as well. The instrument can be developed in-house, with organisation-specific competencies, or it can be bought as a generic tool containing the suppliers own set of performance measures.

### **(3)        Deciding on the items to be rated**

There are different types of indicator: traits for psychometric applications (such as measuring Emotional Intelligence) or workplace behaviours (for competencies).

Whichever type are used, the wording needs to be unambiguous and specific about the behaviour in question in order to reduce rater error.

### **(4)        Deciding who the participants are**

When McCarthy and Garavan compiled their list of steps in 2001, it was common for 360 degree to be a voluntary activity. Mandatory participation is the norm at the time of writing this thesis. Any mandatory measure of performance can introduce factors that affect the reliability of ratings, since raters and the people participating can all feel it to be a more threatening experience than a voluntary exercise would be.

### **(5)        Train or prepare the raters (including participants who are self-reporting)**

This forms part of the overall communication around implementing 360 degree feedback. Giving and receiving negative feedback is an important aspect of this. Rating errors, such as halo effects, central tendency and leniency, also need to be discouraged. These errors

are discussed later in this chapter. An additional benefit of training is the stakeholder 'buy-in' that results.

#### **(6) Choice of raters**

Generally the raters are boss, self, colleagues and direct reports. These can be chosen by the 360 degree feedback administrator or by the participant. In either case it is important to have a sample of raters who provide unbiased ratings.

#### **(7) Distributing of, and access to, questionnaires**

Paper and pencil questionnaires have been supplanted by online methods and this has improved one of the original obstacles to acceptance, which was uncertainty of confidentiality.

#### **(8) Analysing the data**

The data are reported in similar ways, whichever the instrument. Bar charts record mean scores for competencies and indicators to represent each type of rater (self, boss, colleague or direct report). A report of so-called 'gaps' is common; this is the difference between the mean self score for a competency and the mean of the other rater groups. A gap can be positive (when other raters rate the participant higher than the participants self rating) or negative (others have on average rated the participant lower than the self rating). These graphical presentations are intended to help the participant to digest the feedback. Any narrative feedback comments can also be included in the report.

#### **(9) Feeding back the 360 degree feedback**

The report can be sent to the participant without any additional support offered. It can be sent to the participant and his or her manager to be discussed or it can be given to a coach or trainer to provide advice around the feedback as part of a development programme. Participants can also discuss their results in group or workshop settings in some organisations.

#### **(10) Following-up**

Establishing areas for improvement and identifying priorities for training and development are important next steps. Action plans or Personal Development Plans are generally useful and can be augmented with the provision of coaching or other forms of support in achieving development goals.

#### **(11) Repeating the 360 degree feedback**

If the purpose of 360 degree feedback is to develop management skills, the process is sometimes repeated annually or bi-annually. If the 60° feedback is used for a talent management purpose such as succession planning, it will be used each time there is a need. If the purpose is performance appraisal it is likely to be applied annually.

Following this checklist for effective practice suggests that 360 degree feedback requires considerable investment of resource and effort if it is to be applied effectively. This suggests in turn that to maximise the return on this investment it is useful to examine what factors contribute to making 360 degree feedback work well.

## **Appendix Seven**

### **The measures used – Competencies and rating scales in 360 degree feedback**

Nowack (1993) suggested a number of different models used in the design of 360 degree instruments:

- 1) A design based on ‘traditional’ job analysis, which is normally a list of the skills and knowledge that people need to carry out a particular job.
- 2) Competency based instruments, which have broader application across different types of job and which are derived from the defined characteristics of ‘successful’ performers.
- 3) Some instruments are based on theoretical or conceptual models, such as Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 1997).
- 4) Personality theory is used in some models. These instruments would be used to give psychometric feedback based on a particular feedback theory, particular the so-called ‘factor analytic’ models, such as Cattell’s 16PF (Kline, 1993). This is the least common application of the instrument.

The use of a model with a 360 degree instrument will be determined mostly by the purpose of the feedback. For identifying training and development needs, any of these can be used when combined with an appropriate communication and project management framework. But for more administrative purposes the use of theoretical or personality-models are usually avoided.

The most common foundation for 360 degree feedback at the time of writing is an organisation-specific competency model (McCarthy & Garavan, 2001). The nature of these competency descriptions and definitions can affect the way in which feedback is received, as described by Feedback Intervention Theory above. The interpretation of questionnaire items and the way ratings are awarded by raters may also be a significant factor to consider. Because of this I will pay some attention to the notion of ‘competency models’

and the various rating scales that are used to try and standardise responses to questionnaires.

## **Competencies**

The seminal work of Boyatzis (1982) introduced the idea of competencies to a wide ‘market’ of potential users, *viz.* organisations with employees. His definition of the term ‘competency’ is the one I shall use throughout this thesis, which is different from other uses of the term such as the ‘competence *of organisations*’ (my italics) described by Prahalad and Hamel (1990). The term competency has been used in a variety of circumstances, and even in practitioners’ minds there are different interpretations: from the task-derived model of the Management Charter Initiative in the UK to the behavioural, ‘person-oriented’ definition proposed by Boyatzis.

Boyatzis drew on the earlier work of McClelland (1961) and suggested a definition of competencies as dimensions of behaviour. The idea is that these units of behaviour define what people need to have to do well, their underlying attributes (blends of motives, traits, skills, and knowledge). These definitions could then be used by senior managers to more accurately fit people to jobs. Extension of this outcome has led to a wide range of human resource systems and applications, including 360 degree feedback: all based on a process of defining superior performance. So competency models provide something more than a vocabulary to describe performance levels, they provide a mechanism for organisational change and control.

One important aspect of the growth of competency modelling (where competencies are specific to particular organisations and are not generic) is their ‘face validity’; their general acceptance by managers and employees. The ‘internal logic’ of the models, based as they are on research within the organisation, linking the definitions to the organisation’s strategy or ‘vision’, and often involving the participation of employees, is a factor in establishing competencies, to the extent that they can become an institutional ‘myth’ (Salaman, 2002).

There are weaknesses associated with the competency approach to HR management. The fact that the initial research came from a consulting firm as a commercial assignment makes the foundation of the competency approach weak in that it lacks any theoretical

rigour. But the empirical nature of the research and the subsequent acceptance of the definitions often lead to a fairly uncritical analysis by organisations so that competencies are taken and applied with enthusiasm. The economic bias of these models, with their emphasis on success in entrepreneurial terms can make them appear cosmetic to the outsider. The behavioural descriptions can become embedded and turn into prescriptive demands of employees, leading to a static and conforming set of principles rather than the flexibility and adaptation originally required. The rigid specifications of the behavioural attributes may even dampen the learning process, despite the advantage of clarifying the performance levels required in particular jobs.

## **Rating Scales**

### **Applications of rating scales**

The quantitative research associated with Occupational Psychology is generally associated with two methods of data collection and hypothesis testing. These methods are ‘experiments’ and ‘surveys’. In social research usually the practical option is to carry out a survey.

To quantify people’s opinions, a survey will often use some sort of rating scale. This immediately confers upon the numerical scale so-called ‘psychometric properties’ which are:

- |                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| <b>Reliability</b> | The amount of variance in the selection of scale numbers that can be attributable to the factor being assessed (rather than to ‘errors’).  |
| <b>Validity</b>    | Whether or not the scale is measuring the factor being assessed. There are various sub-classes of psychometric validity measures – a full description can be found in Kline (1992:15). The definitions are mainly to do with whether the purely the factor in question is measured or whether or not the scores predict that people will apply the factor to the appropriate degree. The ‘factor’ being an attribute of some sort. |

**Generalisability** The reliability measure mentioned above suggests that error will creep into the use of rating scales. Generalisability theory is a way of further identifying possible sources of error, by testing particular conditions for their influence on the ratings obtained. If another factor is found to contribute significant variation in the scores for a questionnaire item, then the item does not generalise across different levels of the factor. These additional factors can be simple things, such as the conditions under which the questionnaire is administered.

These three terms for the psychometric properties of questionnaire ratings can also be applied to qualitative studies, so that their meaning is preserved but without the statistical basis for the definitions above. In particular, it seems that the term ‘generalisability’ has been applied rather more loosely in qualitative work than the definition above intends. It is often taken to simply mean whether or not the findings apply in different settings to the one where the study was carried out.

### **Rating Scale use in 360 degree feedback**

The majority of 360 degree feedback instruments use rating scales so that people can suggest the level of competency the subject has demonstrated in the course of his or her work. This can be supplemented within the data collection instrument by the inclusion of ‘narrative boxes’ to collect verbal comments and feedback, but it is rare for an instrument to rely purely on narrative.

The collection of ratings has probably influenced the nature of the research into the method. The psychometric properties listed above have been exhaustively examined in different settings and differences between the scoring patterns of different rater groups have been compared for signs of emerging patterns and links.

### **Types of 360 degree Rating Scale**

Graphic Rating Scale (GRS) formats have been used in appraisals for some time. These are generally statements about performance (such as ‘adjusts to the demands of the job’ or

even just ‘level of performance’) followed by a scale which goes from ‘low level’ to ‘high level’ or from ‘poor’ to ‘excellent’. These scales are particularly prone to subjective bias.

In 360 degree feedback, behaviour-based scales are most commonly used. (Other scales, less popular in 360 degree feedback or appraisal, are described and explained by DeVellis (1991)). The two most popular (Tziner & Kopelman, 2002) behaviour-based scales are :

**Behavioural Observation Scales (BOS)** These ask raters to report the frequency of specific job-related behaviours.

*Example:*

Creates a motivating environment to achieve goals.                    1            2            3            4            5

1 is ‘hardly ever’ or ‘to a very little extent’, 5 is ‘always’ or ‘to a very great extent’

**Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scales (BARS)** These use behavioural statements to illustrate multiple performance levels. Here the aim is to clarify exactly what activities should be performed and how the outcomes link to ratings.

*Example*

Achievement Orientation

- 1 Wants to do a job well. May express frustration at waste or inefficiency.
- 2 Creates own measures of excellence. May focus on new or more precise methods of achieving goals.
- 3 Improves performance. Makes specific changes in the system without setting any specific goal.
- 4 Makes cost-benefit analyses. Makes decisions and sets priorities on the basis of calculated benefits.
- 5 Takes calculated entrepreneurial risks. Commits significant resources and/or time to increase benefits in the face of uncertainty.

(After Hay/McBer Generic Competency Framework)

There would be similar scales for additional competencies, described level by level.

Rating scale selection and deployment in a 360 degree instrument has two important direct effects: one is its ability to guide raters to selecting the right number on the scale, and the other is its effect on providing the subjects of 360 degree feedback with feasible development goals.

Thus, what initially appears as a matter of final detail in putting together a 360 degree instrument in fact has a potentially significant impact on the entire system. It affects communication (in terms of roles and relationships between raters and ratees), the focus on performance goals, the feedback environment, and also the attitudes people will have to the system as a whole.

There is also an impact on the type of research, mentioned above. Because numerical ratings are involved, and because there are similarities with the way traditional psychometric tests (for personality and aptitude) are constructed, it is possible to look at the pattern of ratings statistically. Means and variances can be calculated for the entire survey and for the different respondent groups. Norms can be developed so that people can see how their own ratings compare with those of others. And comparisons can also be drawn between the ratings people award themselves and those provided by their co-workers.

My concerns with this approach are:

Despite attempts to standardise the data to take account of the different rating scales employed, the rating scales attract varying levels of subjectivity amongst raters. Even the seemingly precise definitions of the BAR scales are open to question and interpretation and also suffer, as with all typologies, from not being able to include all aspects of performance at a particular level.

### **Why 360 degree feedback uses competencies**

In principle, competencies offer an efficient method for individuals to advance their careers or to identify areas for improvement – the specific and observable performance indicators can be inserted into instruments such as 360 degree feedback and the resultant profile of strengths, adequacies and weaknesses can form the basis of a personal development plan. The fact that the indicators are intrinsically linked to organisational

objectives means that, from the senior management point of view, all personal development plans will be in some way advancing the organisational cause. They can view the collective development plan as an organisational improvement strategy. Extending this argument a little further leads to the possibility that manipulation of competency model design by senior managers of an organisation can re-define managerial qualities and behaviour over time. Apart from being able, through assessment of the competencies, to identify people in downsizing operations, the competencies can be used to 'squeeze more from less' from those remaining and also encourage the growth of self-serving, individualistic managerial behaviour.

The perceived general validity of competencies removes, at least partially, the influence of external institutions and professional bodies and makes career success an achievable target for all employees. Group norms and the behaviour of the market thus become the main influences on corporate behaviour and culture. The competencies can regulate managerial behaviour by emphasising and defining how people 'fit' with the culture and by providing methods of assessment to see how well people do fit. In the UK public sector, the equivalent to the external market is the broader political landscape.

A criticism of HR policies in general can be particularly applicable to competency applications, which is that initiatives are often advertised as being able to increase creativity and managerial autonomy and discretion, when in fact the underlying corporate objectives are highly prescriptive (Delbridge, 1993). Yet 360 degree feedback relies predominantly on the existence of competency frameworks but at the same time is perceived as an innovative and flexible self-development tool. Given this apparent conflict of messages, the effectiveness of 360 feedback needs to be considered in the broad context of the organisational use of competencies and the subsequent conditions in which the feedback is received and used.