



LEGAL TALENT &amp; INCLUSION

## Practice Innovations: The power of 360-degree feedback to enable greater lawyer retention

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Only a handful of law firms conduct comprehensive upward reviews, and even fewer embrace 360-degree feedback surveys. If your firm isn't doing either, now is the time to start.

As more law firms are looking for ways to increase lawyer retention in today's environment, conducting these types of reviews might hold the key.

"There is often a great gap between how we see ourselves and how others see us," according to Merrick Rosenberg, CEO of Take Flight Learning, who has been conducting these type of reviews for more than 20 years. "360-degree feedback shines a light on the perceptions of others so we can bridge that gap through increased self-awareness and behavioral change."

Consider this a talent development tool for partners — those firms that are committed to developing partners can demonstrate their commitment to creating a positive culture.

### Upward vs. 360-degree reviews

There is a distinction between upward reviews and 360-degree feedback surveys, although sometimes the two terms are used interchangeably. An upward review is when employees or team members evaluate the individual or manager who assigns and oversees their work product. The questions are typically around delegation, feedback, and management skills. A 360-degree review is conducted across the organization and includes feedback from employees, peers, superiors, and occasionally clients.

One of the main differences is that the reviewers are rating statements about the individual on a scale from 1 to 10. The person being rated also completes a self-evaluation. The feedback requested on a 360-degree survey encompasses a variety of areas such as leadership and management skills, strategic vision, decisiveness, communication styles, and core values, among others.

Often, associates can be concerned about participating in upward reviews, and partners tend to avoid both types of reviews. This is especially true in smaller firms or small practice groups where the ratio is fewer associates to partners. Too often, this dynamic means that firms do not move forward with 360-degree surveys, says Michael Coates, managing director at Protostar Leadership Development. "The off-the-record reason was always the same, that a few influential partners were nervous of allowing peers and staff to provide feedback about them."

This is why it's so important that everyone involved understands a 360-degree survey is for personal development and the information gathered should never be used for promotion, recruitment, or compensation decisions.

## Why do 360s?

Large and small companies use 360-degree reviews to boost their leaders' confidence and to uncover areas for improvement. This type of review gives those employees or lawyers who directly report to the manager as well as other colleagues a safe way to provide positive and constructive feedback in an anonymous fashion. This feedback keeps leaders accountable for their decisions, behaviors, and impact on others.

For example, a study showed that malpractice claims were reduced after a group of doctors at four academic medical centers all covered by the same malpractice insurance went through a 360-degree review process. These physicians learned to improve their teamwork and communication skills with colleagues, staff, and patients — and it's possible for lawyers to benefit in the same fashion.

"Attorneys need to know how they are impacting their staff, and they should also know how they are perceived by their peers," Rosenberg explains. "By understanding the perceptions of others, they can adjust their behaviors to create an engaging culture and achieve success."

## Why now?

Slowly, law firms are growing accustomed to having data analytics and metrics drive their financial commitments, but they lag when it comes to the people side of law. Karthick Sundar, Managing Partner at Survey Research Associates, says that needs to change. "The leaders and firms will start viewing performance management as attorney development, with people growth and coaching being the focal point of the process," Sundar says, adding that current subjectivity along with the conscious and unconscious biases would be removed and replaced by the data generated via 360-degree reviews.

Oz Benamram, Chief Knowledge & Innovation Officer at Simpson Thacher & Bartlett agrees. “The 360-degree feedback process most definitely made me a better leader,” Benamram says. “After hearing that I was a micro-manager three years in a row, it was impossible not to address it if I wanted my team to keep taking the process (and me) seriously.”

## What exactly is it?

A proper 360-degree survey requires the reviewer to think about what the partner is doing right, what he or she can do differently, and what information should be learned related to the partner’s behavior. This is not a list of random questions written by attorneys sent out through Survey Monkey. Indeed, survey designers need to be careful to follow proper psychometric principles, such as:

- survey items must be observable behaviors, not attitudes, motives, values, thoughts, or feelings, which reside within a person and cannot be seen;
- each question must describe only *one* behavior so that the feedback recipient clearly knows which behavior to work on;
- language must be simple and clear so that everyone interprets each survey item in the exact same way; and
- items must focus on important behaviors that are critical to success.

Further, there are several nuances that need to be considered when this review is used in the legal or other professional service professions, and survey questions need to reflect that. For example, managers and attorneys need to be reviewed on how they:

- proactively capitalize on emerging trends and opportunities;
- maintain positive relationships with a network of key contacts throughout the firm;
- consider the impact of their actions on practice areas and other areas of the organization; and
- involve those that will be affected by decisions in the decision-making process.

Once completed, the individual’s self-report is compared to the feedback from others so the partner can see if their self-perception is aligned. The review report should remain confidential so only the individual will see the results. It is recommended to have a coach work with the attorney to analyze the results and help create a development plan if behavior change is a subsequent goal.

## What, no behavior change?

After the data has been aggregated and a summary report is sent to the individual sometimes nothing happens. The partner reads it, has an internal (and maybe external) reaction, and puts it in a drawer never to be mentioned again. Without a follow up meeting, a coaching session, or help digesting the results this activity will not affect an attorney’s behaviors.

To prevent this from happening a firm needs to have a comprehensive — but not complicated — plan to roll out a 360-degree feedback process. Here’s a simple structure to follow:

- The firm should secure an outside provider to create and conduct the 360-degree surveys because self-made surveys usually do not follow proper psychometric principles.
- It should be articulated clearly *why* the firm is doing reviews, and be sure everyone understands this is for personal self-improvement.
- Firm leaders should gain management support across the firm for the review, by for example, doing it first so they can speak about the process in a positive manner.
- The firm should communicate the plan for administering the survey while assuring confidentiality and anonymity. The firm should also administer the survey with lots of encouragement and even incentives to increase return rate.
- The firm should provide training for those giving feedback, if not using an outside specialist make sure to have the survey provider conduct the training.
- The firm also should provide resources for partners who want to change behaviors, such as coaching, training, counseling, or whatever is needed to create positive behavior change.

## Is it worth it?

The corporate world has utilized 360-degree feedback as a development tool for all levels of leadership for years. Now, law firms should do the same. When companies invest in their people, culture improves, retention increases, and ultimately, profit goes up — and the same goes for law firms.

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